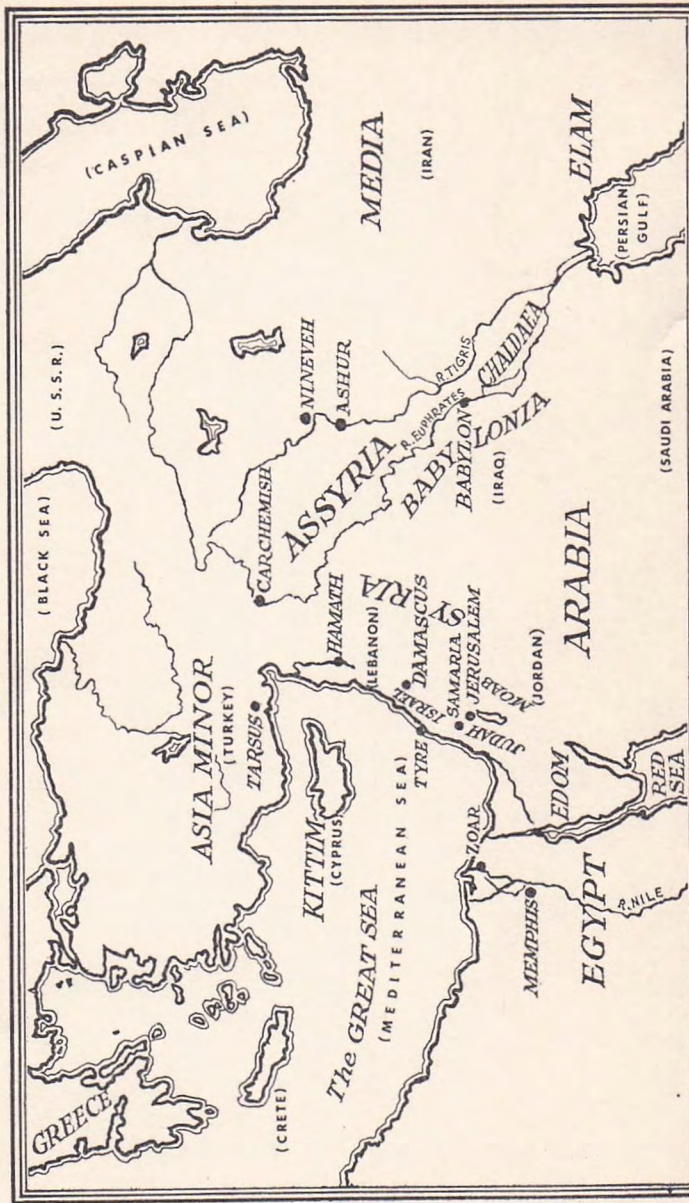


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THE OLD TESTAMENT
FOR
MODERN EXPLORERS



THE OLD
TESTAMENT
FOR MODERN
EXPLORERS

Notes on the Book of Books

ROLAND WILSON



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PART ONE

The World's Best-seller

GOD deals with people and nations. He needs them for the working out of His Plan for the world.

The books we now set out to read, and I hope study, are a record. They contain history of men and events, often of importance for our knowledge of these centuries. They also record God's ways with men, and men's ways with God. This makes them all the more relevant to an age in which human wisdom has so obviously failed.

No one can force the books of the Bible on another person. They stand like a mountain waiting for some venturesome men to climb. And those who climb get the view. These books are like a mine, in which gold or iron or diamonds lie hidden. Some treasures are near the surface. Others require work to excavate them. But the miner who perseveres is enriched.

Some people treat the Bible like a man studying a menu card which happens to be written in a foreign tongue. Many of the dishes mean nothing to him. So with a loud complaint he goes out hungry because there are items he cannot

interpret. But a very little study or enquiry would have led him to the roast beef or the chicken or the eggs.

A student of electronics does not abandon his subject because there are ideas, symbols, theories he cannot at once grasp. He moves, as all good students do, from the known to the unknown.

The Bible, approached by men and women of humble heart and open mind, has inspired statesmanship, kindled heroism, stirred compassion, directly pioneered social changes, broken down inequalities, been the heart-beat of home life, left lasting mark on national character, solaced the lonely, given strength to the grieving and been the daily companion of men and women, high and humble, for hundreds of years and in a hundred lands. It remains the world's best-seller.*

Its foundation truth is that God rules in the affairs of men. Therefore the modern-day advocates of almighty man twitter with wrath and rebuke, and with fear, when it is upheld as man's heritage and storehouse of truth. But the symphony of God's realities in the Bible will be played in the minds and hearts of men and women long after other voices are silenced and forgotten.

* The last figures issued by the United Bible Societies show a world record of over 104 million copies of Scripture distributed in 1967. The whole Bible is now printed in 1,283 languages. More than 800 translations are in course of preparation at any one time.

There are people who question the validity of the Old Testament. They treat it like a series of fairy stories, or claim that it contradicts modern science or research. Then they make use of these criticisms to try and destroy the idea of God for which the Old Testament stands. What they are really doing is to cast doubt and dirt on what is beyond their own experience. It is as if we took a medicine that has through the years saved millions of lives all over the earth and set out to persuade the cured that their health is fraudulent. The medicine is no longer on trial. And its test and its tribute are to be found in the strong right arms, the brave steps, the life and laughter of the men, women and children who have been made well and given fresh nerve, muscle and direction.

The evidence of modern research, conducted by experts in the lands with which the Old Testament is concerned, overwhelmingly confirms events about which we read in the Bible itself. The remains of buildings, cities, weapons, inscribed tablets and records, which have been found and are still being found in increasing numbers, fit into the pattern of Old Testament history. They also reveal the scope of the civilisation which the books of the Old Testament describe.*

* For further evidence study, for example, *The Bible as History*, by Werner Keller, published by The Reprint Society, London, by arrangement with Hodder & Stoughton.

But the Bible does not need defending. Its history and its character drawing are written, as in all great writing, for a purpose. What is needed is sensible study and application.

These notes will not do the work for you. Their aim is to stimulate exploration. If you come across places that mean little to you, move on to the next point, and come back later to what you might not at this stage grasp. But in this field, as in any other field of study, it may be a blunder to assume that anything I cannot understand is not worth grasping.

ONE REASON for studying the Old Testament is that Jesus Christ used it constantly, quoted it, and connected it directly with what He was doing to forge a new society. It was the only Bible He knew. St Paul, too, was steeped in it. He quotes it, they say, 199 times.

The Old Testament has thirty-nine books. Many of them are full of people who made history. In Christ's day these books stood somewhat as they do in our Bible. They had been put together in the Hebrew language, and they were read at that time by Jewish communities all over the Mediterranean world, first in Hebrew and then also in the Aramaic or Greek languages. They included, first, the first five books in our Bible from Genesis to Deuteronomy. These described the birth and establishment of the Jewish nation. Then came the historical books,

Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. After these came the books of the Prophets which extend over six hundred years, and finally the poetic books like Job and the Psalms.

Some of the early books were written down and collected long after the events described, so the words we read reflect not only the events but also the spirit of the later day in which they were collected. But woven into all these books are the very early strands of material which have been handed down, as was the custom in those days, by memory through many generations. At the end of these notes there is a survey of these books with a short piece about each, which may help intending readers.

Jesus repeatedly refers to the Old Testament. At the time of His temptation, when the devil offers Him every human attraction, bodily satisfaction, power, possessions, success, He does not argue but quotes from the great truths of His Faith (Matthew 4, 4): 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God' (Deuteronomy 8, 3). In the second temptation (Matthew 4, 5) the devil then quotes Scripture back at Him (Psalm 91, 11-12): 'He shall give His angels charge over thee, and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone,' to which Jesus replied, quoting from Deuteronomy 6, 16, 'Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.'

On another occasion, still early in His work,

Jesus has gone to His own town of Nazareth. The Jewish authorities ask Him to speak in the synagogue on the Sabbath day. He calls for the copy of the book of Isaiah, and reads at the sixty-first chapter: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; He hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach freedom to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim a year when men may find acceptance of the Lord.' This is and remains Christ's charter for men.

At a later time Jesus takes Peter, James and John apart to a high mountain, to the place where they see Him talking with Moses, who represents the Law, and with Elijah, representing the Prophets. His clothes and His face shone, we are told (Mark 9, 1-13). In His talk to the crowds by the Lake of Galilee He also links Himself with God's truths given in both the Law and the Prophets. He says (Matthew 5, 17): 'Think not that I am come to destroy the Law, or the Prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.' In another passage (Mark 14, 26), before the Trial and Death of Jesus and just after His final supper with His friends, we read that 'when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives'. No one knows what that hymn was. It was almost certainly one of the songs in our book of Psalms. Perhaps it was Psalm 114, one of the early songs of gratitude and praise,

describing the deliverance of the Jewish People. This was one of the Psalms traditionally sung at the Passover Feast. It may even have been sung to one of the old Jewish melodies which survive, like the 'Tonus Peregrinus' or 'Stranger's Tune'.

Then, at the drama of the Cross, Jesus' own last words are taken from one of David's songs, Psalm 22, verse 1: 'My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?' The Psalm goes on to describe such a scene of suffering, where evil men cast lots for the sufferer's clothes. From the earliest Christian times it has been read as an interpretation of the Crucifixion scene.

In another passage, after the rising again of Christ, on the evening of the first Easter Day, two of His friends (Luke 24, 13-35) are found walking to a village called Emmaus. The risen Jesus joins them. They tell Him of the events of the last week, their disappointment and hopelessness. Then He says to them: "O fools and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He explained to them in the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.'

The Creation Story

The Old Testament is not a scientific treatise. It is the unfolding of a way of life and thought, an expanding system of ideas by which men are meant to live, and by which history is made.

CHRIST came not only into history but from out of history. We study the Old Testament because it covers the first two thousand years of a continuing war of ideas. What idea was to run man? You can no more understand the Old Testament unless you read it in this way than you can understand the present-day world if you do not study it in the light of the battle of ideas. As Dr Frank Buchman says in *Remaking the World*, 'The battle of the ideologies was the granite of the Old and the New Testaments.'^{*}

Take, for example, the story of the Creation, which you read about in the first and second chapters of the book of Genesis. Karl Marx took a certain view of the creation. He said, briefly, that matter always existed, and that history is

^{*} *Remaking the World*, the speeches of Frank N. D. Buchman, Blandford Press (1961), p 142. The whole speech 'The War of Ideas' is relevant.

determined by the action and interaction of material conditions. His conclusion is, in effect, that any wise man will fall into step with the march of this materialist dialectic and speed it on its way. It represents the great rhythm of history, and it is better to keep in step with this rhythm, and help it forward, than to be crushed by its onward march. The account at the beginning of Genesis is different. Genesis (chapter 1) says that God was there first, and that He made matter. He made the world and saw it was good. He then made the animals. Finally, He made man, and He made him in His own image, which, if it is true, settles man's destiny for ever. He put man in a perfect situation; and He finished off His work of creation by making a day of rest.

The central theme of the Bible is that wisdom consists in getting into tune with God's creative rhythm, and the Bible stories tell us how we can do so, and how we can speed that rhythm on its way. The whole pattern of God's rhythm through history is made not by man fitting in with and aiding the movement of matter, as Marx said, but by those people who listen to God and obey. They are the people who made real, and still make real, the programme of God for men.

Then there is the story of the fall of man, in the third chapter of Genesis. The characters are the serpent, the woman, the man and God. Marx gave one interpretation of man's fall. He said things went on merrily for a time, and then tools

and weapons were made. People used the tools and weapons, and so you had two classes, an exploiting and an exploited class, and that was when the cycle of trouble began. Then there was a Genevese philosopher, Rousseau, who also gave an interpretation of the fall of man. He says that in the early days there was 'a noble savage', and then there were a lot of noble savages, and they came together and made an agreement, by which they would sacrifice certain of their liberties in order to gain certain communal advantages. And that, said Rousseau, was where the trouble began.

If you turn to the third chapter of Genesis you find a different version of where the trouble started. The people were happy and they had daily touch with each other and with God. Then the serpent came along, and made a suggestion to the woman. The suggestion was simple: that she and her husband should do something that God had told them not to do, and grab something which God had not given. A flood of troubles followed.

There are many arguments about these different philosophies of evil. Many books have been written about them. But the thing we have to ask is, which is true to life?

A man I knew was an international football player in Scotland. One day he was in hospital with an injury. Not long before this he had entered into a deep change in his life. One result of this change was that he was reading from the

Old Testament. The man in the next bed, who had been watching him, said: 'Henry, you don't hold with all that stuff, about Eve being taken out of Adam's fifth rib and so on?' Henry turned and looked at him for a time, and then said: 'Bill, Adam's fifth rib is not your problem.'

The point of the Genesis story is that a moral clash, the eternal struggle between good and evil, represents the master truth about the universe. The real issue is the issue of the human will. All through the books of the Old Testament that follow, the progress of this battle is set forth, as it is fought out in human, often very human, hearts.

The Story of Abraham

*God's active intervention in
the affairs of men*

THE STORY starts about two thousand years before Christ. Monuments and excavations have given us considerable information about this age. There was a great civilisation in Egypt. It was at least at its height, and may already have been declining. The pyramids were there for Abraham to see, just as they are today.

Abraham himself came from a place called Ur of the Chaldees, in Mesopotamia, now part of Iraq. There is an Ur Junction on the Baghdad-Basra railway, near the head of the Persian Gulf. At Ur what was called the Sumerian civilisation flourished. It was the civilisation before the Assyrian. Some of the graves which have been excavated are dated by the experts at 3500 B.C. For centuries an advanced and sophisticated civilisation flourished at Ur. It was in this atmosphere that Abraham and his family had grown up. At this point in Abraham's life God intervened

(Genesis 12, 1-4). He took this man Abraham out from Ur of the Chaldees with all his relatives and told him to move into a new land which God would later show him.

That was a tremendous event, not only in Abraham's life but in history. Abraham obeyed. He took his relations with him—in those days they had large families—and went out, not knowing whither he went.

So Abraham became a traveller. In Genesis 18 there is a story about the development of the nation round his family. More than once God told Abraham that he would have a son, and that from his offspring He would raise up a great nation as numerous as the sand on the sea-shore or the stars in the heavens. But the Bible says that Abraham and his wife Sarah were both old and no children had come. On this occasion Abraham is sitting in his tent door, and God visits him. Abraham sends Sarah to prepare dinner, and God and Abraham talk together. Again God tells him about his family to be. Sarah is getting supper and listening at the same time. When she overhears this suggestion that she is to have a family she laughs to herself. God hears her, and asks why. 'Well, I am far too old,' she says. Soon after the son came. They called him Isaac, which means 'laughter'. From Isaac sprang the whole Jewish national family in future generations.

The story of this family, the way it grew as God had foretold, its divisions, its tragedies, its

miracles, its golden thread of faith, its wanderings, is told in detail in the book of Genesis. It is quoted again and again through the Bible, which constantly speaks of 'the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'.

Genesis chapter 37 to the end of the book (omitting chapter 38) records the adventures of Jacob's son, Joseph. Starting with the jealousy of Joseph's brothers, the story describes how Joseph was swept off to Egypt in captivity, and then rose to power and position there. You will be lured by the moving humanity of this story—one of the great stories of the Old Testament. It provides the natural link with the adventures in Egypt described in the next book of Exodus.

You will find these stories frank. The people God picked were not just good people. Many of the Jews were wily men and women who often played tricks on each other. The Bible makes no effort to whitewash its characters. It lays bare the truth freely, for us to learn. St Paul said, 'While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5, 8). But all the events and decisions are put in the setting of men in touch with God, and given the opportunity to obey Him. That was always true of God in His dealings with the Jews.

God's active intervention took two forms. First, He told Abraham and the others He spoke to where to go and what to do. He provided them with definite, accurate, adequate information. They did not always obey. But He con-

stantly offered them a green or a red light on their road, though as a rule only for the next, necessary stretch of road ahead. In this way He taught them simply to trust Him.

Secondly, God intervened to tell His people what He Himself was like. To us the conception of one God, who is also a good God, who loves and cares, is familiar. But at that time it was not so. Rather the reverse. People believed in tribal gods who moved with their tribes, geographical gods who frequented some particular area, national gods who were recognised by whole nations. Some of these gods were doubtful people. Progressively through the story of the Old Testament God works, stage by stage, to build up in His people the right idea about Himself.

From Moses

Probably 1400 B C

to Solomon

Died 937 B C

*God's intervention is both
personal and national*

THE next great figure in the story, some five or six hundred years later, about 1300 B C is Moses. Moses develops the further truth that the intervention of God is not only personal and in the family but is national and covers every part of a nation's life, all it does as a whole. As you read the Old Testament you find that there is hardly any place where it speaks of a merely personal plan of salvation without a plan of salvation for one's country or for the world. The two grow together. God's programme includes everything. It is a philosophy of government by men governed by God.

Look for a moment at Moses. Abraham's wandering people had found their way south to the borders of Egypt, and had become serfs of the

Egyptian King or Pharaoh. In Exodus 2 there is that human story of the birth of Moses, and how he was hidden away among the bulrushes. Moses grows up, and one day he sees an Egyptian overseer brutally treating a Hebrew worker. He looks around, finds there is no one watching and kills the Egyptian. The story of this event leaks out and Moses takes fright. He goes into the wild border country and hires himself out to feed the flocks of a certain Jethro whose daughter he marries.

While he is looking after Jethro's flocks (Exodus 3) he suddenly sees a bush by the wayside burning brightly. He looks at it closely, and finds that although it is on fire, it is not being burned up. Then out of the burning bush comes God's voice to him, 'Moses, Moses.' And he replies, 'Here am I.' God then identifies Himself by saying that He is the God of Moses' ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And He tells Moses to take off his shoes because the place where he is standing is holy ground. Then He goes on to tell Moses that He has chosen him for national leadership, and that his first task is to lead enslaved Israel safely out of the hands of Pharaoh. Moses himself is to be God's messenger to Pharaoh.

Moses has a natural reaction to this proposal. 'Who am I, Lord,' he says (Exodus 3, 11), 'that I should go to Pharaoh?' To take unwelcome truth to an Eastern king of that time on behalf of a people in serfdom was not a popular mission.

Anything might happen. Moses had many excuses. God's only answer is a promise that He will be with him, and that the people will find their way into a land flowing with milk and honey.

Moses finally obeys. He and his brother Aaron go in to Pharaoh and deliver God's message, that Pharaoh should let the people go and serve their God with sacrifice.

Pharaoh's first reply is to double the amount of work the people have to produce daily. This disaster is a severe test of faith, not only for the people who grumble bitterly to Moses but for Moses himself. A further interview with Pharaoh follows, in which Moses tells the king of the consequences of refusing God's demands on behalf of His chosen people. You can read the story of what happened, the tale of plague and tragedy which fell on Egypt, and the setting free of the people, in Exodus 5-12, 42.

Finally, Pharaoh consents to let them go. One night the children of Israel move out into the wilderness, on their long march to the Promised Land. They are led by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Almost at once Pharaoh changes his mind, and pursues them with a picked army. In Exodus 14 you can read the account of the escape through the Red Sea and the destruction of Pharaoh's chariots and men.

It was during the difficult journey through the wilderness that the system of law was given by

God to Moses to pass on to the people. In Exodus 20-23 you will find the Magna Carta of the Law, the Ten Commandments, which are very much to the point today, and also a series of regulations as to social conduct which even in our sophisticated age would go a long way towards ensuring a happy, prosperous and just society.

This ancient story became the epic of Hebrew history. And the mark of the epic is not personal or national greatness or tradition, as in the Greek epic of Homer or the Roman epic of Virgil, but the guiding, controlling, caring hand of Israel's God.

Again and again, in difficulties personal and national, the Jews turn back to this token of God's love. He rescued them from bondage in Egypt, took them safely through the Red Sea and the wilderness, accompanied them on their wanderings through those critical forty years and finally established them in the land He had promised to their Fathers. When all their hopes seemed to be extinguished, as later on in the time of their Exile in Babylon, men took courage about the present and the future through seeing the unmistakable pattern of God's guidance for their nation in the past.

Moses and his successors piloted the people to the Promised Land. Here, after many battles against the previous owners, they settled and began to gather round themselves the marks of an established nation. At one period, before the

kings were appointed, the Israelites were ruled by a series of judges, or chieftains. You can read about this time, which covers such names as Gideon, Deborah and Samson, in the book of Judges. One of the victories of the Israelites at this time is the occasion for the Triumph Song of Deborah, which you can read in chapter 5 of the book of Judges. It is a very old song, one of the oldest things in the whole Bible. In it we see the temper of this early age, preserved in the words and the spirit in which Deborah expressed it. It reflects a fierce tribal God who breathes vengeance, yet cares for His people. We can later see how a knowledge of God developed as the generations went by.

Before 1000 B C the Hebrews were settled firmly in their country. Saul was their first king, David their second. David is a key character of the Bible. His achievement as king was to bring the whole nation together. He occupied Jerusalem, which had been till then a small stronghold set in the hills, and made it a major fortified city, the capital of the nation. He increased the wealth and power of the country, and extended its influence to neighbouring realms. He established its armies.

Years before, when he was still a shepherd boy in his Bethlehem home, God had intervened in David's life. He had sent the prophet Samuel, who had picked him out of all the eight sons of his father Jesse, and anointed him for his coming

kingship (1 Samuel 16, 1-13). Generations of men have fed their hearts on Psalm 23, 'The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.' It was written by a man who knew the shepherd's life, its dangers and its joys.

The eye of the people first fastened on David when he went out and dealt with the Philistine champion Goliath, who was terrorising the Israelite armies (1 Samuel 17). King Saul then made use of him in various ways. But soon Saul sniffed the wind of danger when he heard the crowds chanting, 'Saul has slain his thousands, David his ten thousands' (1 Samuel 18, 7). David had popular appeal. He knew how to give his heart to the people. He won their affection and imagination. It was at this time that his friendship with Saul's son, Jonathan, began (1 Samuel 18, 1).

Saul's jealousy of David grew. He pursued him from place to place. Twice David had the chance to avenge himself on Saul (1 Samuel 24, 1 Samuel 26). Twice David spared him. He would not raise his hand against Saul, who was the Lord's anointed King. Probably it was during this hunted life that David wrote those Psalms, such as the 27th, 37th and 41st, which have solaced men in trouble for nearly three thousand years. He was one of the great poets of the world. Read in 2 Samuel 1 his lament over the death of Saul and Jonathan: 'The beauty of Israel is slain upon thy high places: how are the mighty fallen! . . . Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in

their lives, and in their death they were not divided: they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. . . . How are the mighty fallen, and the weapons of war perished!

David was overflowingly generous. He often failed and fell. He knew how to turn again humbly to God, admit his faults and change his ways. Read 2 Samuel 11 and 12, and then read Psalm 51, which was inspired by just such a shattering experience of change. David constantly 'inquired of the Lord'. He was ever watchful for the purposes God was working out for his nation. He knew, as few men, how to be grateful (see Psalm 103). He enjoyed life, all life. He sang and he danced in God's honour (2 Samuel 6, 16). Poetry was in his heart. He was colourful. The people loved him because he understood them. He inspired devotion; read the story of his mighty men in 2 Samuel 23, 8-17. He shared the emotions of his soul with humanity.

His character is worthy of study because he was a man whom God specially chose. God's covenant with him, His promise to him, is given in 2 Samuel 7. David's house and kingdom are to be established for ever. It was to be from David, the shepherd boy of Bethlehem, that Christ's human family would be directly descended.

The last words of David, the king, are given in 2 Samuel 23, 1-7: 'The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and His word was in my tongue. The God of Israel said, the Rock of Israel spake to me, He

that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain.'

Solomon, David's son, followed his father and reigned till about 937 B.C. He strengthened the material power of the nation, built the Temple at Jerusalem and made alliances with the Egyptians in the south and with the Phoenicians in the north (I Kings 3, 1; I Kings 5, 1-12). His fame spread beyond Israel's borders. The Queen of Sheba came to visit him (I Kings 10). The country grew richer and more prosperous. And danger of decay grew with it. Then as now, affluence, if God is neglected, can corrupt a nation.

God gave Solomon, at his request, largeness of heart, an understanding heart (I Kings 3, 5-15). This quality Solomon, like many other statesmen, did not succeed in passing on to his children. When he died there was rebellion and revolt. The country split into two kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom, known from now on as Israel or Ephraim, had its capital at Samaria. The Southern Kingdom, of Judah, centred around David's capital at Jerusalem.

This split was a turning-point in the people's history. It sharpened the battle of ideas. Ever since the Israelites had occupied the land, they had been tempted to mix and dilute their own high faith with the pagan cults of the local gods.

Jeroboam, one of the northern kings, realised that the restoration of the religion of Jehovah might unite the people and therefore threaten his position. So he made two golden calves, set them up in two of the recognised religious centres, Bethel and Dan, and encouraged the people to go and worship them.

The Prophets Speak

*God's heart and ways progressively revealed.
His care for His people. His purpose for a
nation. His judgment on evil.*

GOD'S answer was the prophets, men who were directly summoned by Him from a variety of occupations, and given the task of fighting for the faith, proclaiming it and telling men what it offered them, what would happen if they rejected it and what His demands on their lives were. Their function was to purify, preserve and proclaim for the times the ancestral faith of the people.

One of the first of the prophets was Elijah. Elijah was a very great figure. He lived about 870 B.C. He fought a prolonged and finally winning battle with King Ahab and his evil wife, Jezebel. The climax of this drama, personal and national, is described in one of the immortal stories of the Bible. You can read it in the 17th, 18th and 19th chapters of 1 Kings.

At this time of slipping morals and sliding faith, Elijah practised and proclaimed to the people the foundation truth that 'thou shalt have no other gods but Me'. His message was the rock on which

Jewish monotheism, the worship of one God, was built. It was Elijah, too, to whom God spoke in 'the still, small voice' (I Kings 19, 12).

Nearly a hundred years after Elijah, at the start of the eighth century, in the Northern Kingdom, came the prophet Amos. Elijah left no book of his writings. His words and work are recorded in the first book of Kings. Amos has a book by his name. He was a shepherd, a herdsman, whom God took and gripped. He describes himself as not even a regular member of the prophets' guild. But in justifying his mission he said (Amos 3, 8), 'The lion hath roared, who will not fear? The Lord God hath spoken, who can but prophesy?'

Some years ago the United States Secretary of State, Mr Hull, said that what the world needed was a modern Amos. Amos, speaking of famine, declared that the danger was not a famine of water or bread, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord (Amos 8, 11).

Amos is the prophet not of who's right, but what's right. The Jews hoped to be privileged as Jehovah's people, over and above the surrounding nations. Amos makes it plain that no one is privileged to do evil. He pillories the wrongs he sees about him, the social injustice, the poverty and the immorality. 'They sold,' he said, 'the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes' (Amos 2, 6). There was never any question of a merely economic blizzard or crisis for Amos. The reason for present shortages and famine, and

for future disaster, is that the nation has disobeyed destiny and based its philosophy on how much each could get for himself. Even so, there is still time, he says (Amos 5, 6), for them to seek the Lord and live. They can seek good and not evil. So shall God be with them.

Amos gave a blunt, devastating charter of right to the people, and to their rulers. His visual aid for the absolute moral standards was a plumb-line which, he says (Amos 7, 8), God is setting in the midst of His people. Through his writings, and the writings of the other prophets who followed him, there appears more and more clearly the conviction that unless Israel and Judah change, and change quickly, and restore the simple standards of moral obedience as a nation, some overwhelming disaster will befall them. National righteousness was a priority before Israel's rights. Unless they accepted that truth, their nation would not survive.

This pungent truth was developed by Hosea a generation later. He used deep experiences in his own family to present truth to the nation. Hosea says the people are like an adulterous wife who deserts her husband. This was a simile they understood. He grimly forecasts the future unless the nation changes. But he also brings in a new note of tenderness, the pain in God's heart and His longing that His picked people shall fulfil His hopes. 'When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called My son out of Egypt. I taught him to

walk, taking him by his arms. But they knew not that I healed them. I drew them with cords of a man, with bands of love. How shall I give thee up? I will not execute the fierceness of My anger. For I am God, not man, the Holy One in the midst of thee' (Hosea 11). It is a long step from the God of Deborah to the God of Hosea.

Amos and Hosea speak of the Assyrian Empire, the world power in the north. Assyria was constantly pushing south towards the sea, and against her powerful rival, Egypt. Living in Israel and Judah was like living in certain countries today. It is not difficult for us to conceive the feelings and passions and fears of a small people threatened by so mighty an empire. Through this aggressor nation God permitted His judgments to be brought on Israel. In 721 BC the disaster these men had foretold happened. The Assyrians (2 Kings 18, 9) swept southwards, took Samaria, the northern capital, and carried away the bulk of the population. Samaria never really revived. It was resettled with non-Jewish people and Jews who had intermarried with other nations. Hence, in Christ's day, it was said (John 4, 9), 'The Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.' It was this deportation of large numbers of the Northern Kingdom which represented the loss of the famous Ten Tribes of Israel.

Samaria had been taken, but Jerusalem was still free. It was next on Assyria's list, on her route to Egypt (2 Kings 18, 17). A few years later, in

the reign of Hezekiah at Jerusalem, the Assyrian armies under Sennacherib poured southwards. The cities of Judah and the countryside were overrun. Only the fortress of Jerusalem remained.

At this point in the history the prophet Isaiah appears. His words you find in roughly the first thirty-nine chapters of the Book of Isaiah. He was the close adviser and friend of the king at Jerusalem. When the Assyrian forces are camped outside the city, and the Assyrian commander is taking every opportunity to send violent messages to the king, the first person King Hezekiah consults is Isaiah. The reply came from Isaiah (2 Kings 19, 6 and 7): 'Thus saith the Lord, Be not afraid of the words with which the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed Me. Behold, I will send a blast upon him, and he shall hear a rumour, and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land.' The armies were withdrawn, only to reappear soon after under King Sennacherib himself. Once more the message comes through Isaiah (2 Kings 19, 32-34): 'Thus saith the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come into this city. By the way that he came, by the same shall he return. For I will save this city for Mine own sake, and for My servant David's sake. And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the Lord went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses.'

As you read this story, you may think, 'Well, is it history?' But this is one of the accounts we can confirm from two other independent sources. The Greek historian Herodotus (writing in the fifth century B C) made enquiries about the strange departure of the Assyrians and their failure to take Jerusalem. He was told in Egypt that their quivers, bows and shield handles were eaten by field-mice, and as they were defenceless, they were defeated with great slaughter. Also, Sennacherib, the Assyrian king himself, has left a record which has been dug up on a clay cylinder in the ruins of his capital, Nineveh. He said, 'As for Hezekiah of Judah, who would not submit to my yoke, forty-six of his strong cities I invested and took. . . . As for himself, I shut him up like a bird in a cage in his royal city of Jerusalem.' Dr Streeter, in his book *The God Who Speaks** (pages 74-75), points out, 'This was strictly true; but it was not what Sennacherib had meant to do. He wanted to catch the bird and be himself the master of its fortress cage.'

This story inspired an English account by Lord Byron, which many a schoolchild, who may not have heard of clay cylinders at Nineveh, will know:

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
 And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
 And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
 When the blue waves roll nightly on deep Galilee.

* Macmillan, 1936

Like the leaves of the forest when summer is green,
That host with their banners at sunset were seen;
Like the leaves of the forest when autumn hath
blown,
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved, and forever grew
still.

And there lay the steed with his nostrils all wide,
And through it there rolled not the breath of his
pride;
And the foam of his gasping lay white on the turf,
And cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf.

And there lay the rider distorted and pale,
With the dew on his brow and the rust on his mail;
And the tents were all silent, the banners alone,
The lances unlifted, the trumpets unblown.

And the widows of Asshur are loud in their wail,
And the idols are broke in the temples of Baal;
And the might of the Gentiles, unsmote by the sword,
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!

Isaiah the prophet had proved right. The Assyrians went away. Jerusalem was given a breathing space, which Isaiah used to the full. He proclaimed a charter of change for the nation. First, he enlarges and deepens the people's knowledge of what God was like. In the story of his own summons (chapter 6) Isaiah shows the purity and the majesty of God. 'Holy, holy, holy is the

Lord of Hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory' (Isaiah 6, 3). God had before been holy, in the sense of being mysterious and apart. Isaiah added to the existing conception this thought of 'holy' meaning pure, absolutely good, undefiled, full of light. Again and again Isaiah speaks of 'the Holy One of Israel'.

Then he forthrightly tells Jerusalem and her leaders that they face change or annihilation (e.g. chapter 29, 1-16). But he offers them the answer, the eternal answer of Isaiah 1, 18-20. He says (chapters 30 and 31) that some of them hope for a protective pact with Egypt. That will not save them. But even now they can escape: 'For thus saith the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning to Me shall ye be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength, but ye would not' (Isaiah 30, 15).

Through these chapters there sounds also a further note of hope. Here are some (you will find others) of the references which should be read, for this is a formative theme: Isaiah 1, 9; 6, 13; 7, 14; 9, 1-7; 10, 20-21; 11, 26; 35. Not only will there be a human remnant, saved through disaster and found faithful, a minority who will preserve the treasure and later give it to the world. There will also be a Deliverer, and a day of Renaissance, when the nations shall tread the right road together, and find peace and blessing on that way. 'For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government shall

be upon His shoulder; and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end' (Isaiah 9, 6-7).

Isaiah's work bore fruit. King Hezekiah, and later King Josiah (621 B C), introduced many reforms of the national religion. And for more than a hundred years Judah was preserved, a period during which a certain number of men became strong enough in their conviction to weather the storms which were on the way. Samaria vanished; Jerusalem remained.

After Isaiah comes Jeremiah. He is one of the prophets who saw and experienced the events he foretold. He was in Jerusalem when it was besieged, captured and destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B C. Jeremiah is the most human of men. His book is full of deeply personal feeling. He pleads, sometimes argues with God (Jeremiah 1, 6; 4, 10; 12, 1; 20, 7-9). He shares his agony of heart as he sees the blind nation he loves moving towards a doom it could still avoid (9, 1: 4, 19). He tells us in the course of his book many incidents of his life. He dictated the book to his secretary Baruch (chapter 36). It was later shown to the King of Judah. The time was winter (chapter 36, 22) and a fire was burning in the room where the king sat. After a few pages had been read to him he was so angry that he slashed the roll with his penknife and tossed it into the

fire. That gesture, however, did not check the march of events. The book was rewritten, and its message came true.

As the danger to the city drew nearer, Jeremiah, who was persistently honest with both leaders and people, was accused of being a fifth columnist. One party wanted to kill him (26, 11). But he had powerful friends who respected his integrity and his open line to his God. He was more than once put in gaol. Once he was let down into a dungeon full of mud (38, 6). When the forces of Nebuchadnezzar finally flooded into Jerusalem, and the leaders of the people were killed or swept off to captivity (read his account in chapter 39), Jeremiah was left there by the Babylonian king and put under the charge of certain special officers. He was able to hearten the people who remained and to send stirring messages of direction and hope to those who had been taken away in an earlier attack (chapter 29). Finally, disobeying Jeremiah's word to them, many of the remaining Jews went to Egypt for safety, taking the old prophet with them.

Jeremiah's book is full of imagery, for the ordinary man to understand. Read, for example, chapter 18 describing his visit to the potter, and chapters 27 and 28 on the sign of the yokes. In chapter 1 he describes his summons (see verses 6-10). Chapter 7 is truth for a nation, a charter of government. Chapter 9, 23-24, proclaims the secret of greatness and glory for a people.

The Message of the Exile

Through a nation to the world

JEREMIAH's battle was to awaken his fellow citizens to the meaning of the events which had happened in the surrounding nations and were now hanging over Jerusalem. The fact of the danger they had come to see. How could they miss it? Babylon had enslaved half their world. What was the reason for it, the interpretation of it? Why did it threaten them?

It threatened them because, according to the Old Testament, the whole of history is enlisted for fulfilling God's plan. History is at the service of the Disposer of Events, the history of men, of nations, of empires. Babylon is being used to awaken truth and faith in a false and faithless nation, which has preferred its programme of selfishness and missed the road of progress and renaissance which was open to it.

The Jews therefore have two opportunities. One is to change and obey now, at once, at the eleventh hour, with all the urgency that the

change demands. Jeremiah tells them this again and again. There is still time. The other is to be carried away to Babylon, and see their homes, their corporate life, their national greatness liquidated. But even this disaster will become the servant of God's Plan. For to a people guided and chided by God's picked men, like Ezekiel and others who shared the Exile with them, pain can be the doorway to truth and change in a way that prosperity and ease had not been. From the darkness of deportation the light of a new faith will shine, a faith which is becoming purified and fitted to be a vehicle to carry God's purpose beyond a single nation to the world.

With Jeremiah God's truth and message becomes deeper and wider, more personal and more universal. The nation has been destroyed, so the message is now freed for the whole earth. Read verses 33-34 of the 31st chapter, key verses in the development of the faith. In this passage on the new covenant Jeremiah gives us God's words to him on what will happen when the people have learned their lesson and been restored to God's heart: 'This is the agreement I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put My Law in their inward parts, and in their hearts will I write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people; and they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord. For they shall all know Me, from the least of them

unto the greatest, saith the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin will I remember no more.'

Meanwhile, with the Jews in Babylon was the prophet Ezekiel. Far away, deported, a refugee, he kept the lamp burning. As you read you see that he believed in the future of Israel. And in chapter 37, which all should read, he gives his conception of the rising again of a dead nation. The valley of dry bones can live. First, as Ezekiel prophesies, the bones come together; then the flesh and the sinews come upon them; then God says to him: 'Prophesy unto the wind, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army.'

And with Ezekiel sang the Psalmist, who, like the rest, had been carried off to the far country (Psalm 137): 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps on the willows. They that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?'

Soon the possibility of this rebirth of the nation began to be real. King Cyrus, the Persian, took Babylon in 539 B C, and let some of the Jews return home. It was during this part of the Exile that the

highest point of Hebrew prophecy was reached, by a writer who shared the Exile, but whose name we do not know. His poems and writings have for some reason been included in the book of Isaiah, and are to be found in chapters 40-55. They speak to the whole world.

The prophet's experience in Babylon had lifted his message. He had seen there the futility of the pagan gods. And he was moved to tell the nations, and to tell history, what the one, true God is really like. 'Comfort ye, comfort ye, My people! . . . The Lord God will come with strong hand. He shall feed His flock like a shepherd; He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young' (Isaiah 40). Ours is the God who has measured the heavens, weighed the mountains, to Whom the nations are as a drop in the bucket, and the isles a very little thing. He sits upon the circle of the earth and the inhabitants of it are as grasshoppers; He stretches out the heavens like a curtain. . . . To whom will you liken Him? 'He fainteth not, neither is weary. . . . Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall; but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint' (Isaiah 40, 28-31).

Read these chapters (40-55). They contain the charter and the burning promise of renaissance,

and the qualities needed in God's chosen instrument to bring renaissance about.

The Exile decided the future history of the Jewish people. It freed their faith for the world. Some Jews settled in Babylon, where no doubt they had a certain influence. Others had been fired with a faith they could never lose and which nothing could overlay or destroy. Jeremiah, at the beginning of the sixth century, had foretold that the Exile would last seventy years (Jeremiah 25, 11; 29, 10-14). About 520 B C the first exiles returned. Led by Haggai and Zechariah, they started to rebuild the Temple. In the book of Nehemiah you will find the story of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem at about 445 B C, the time when the civilisation of Greece across the Mediterranean was at its peak.

Nehemiah was a warrior and a statesman. He displayed a Churchillian spirit. Chapters 4 and 6 describe his struggle and also tell where he drew his strength. He had the secret of getting difficult, disunited and discouraged men to work, and work together.

In the five centuries which followed, Jerusalem never again enjoyed full political freedom. The Jews were under the moderate rule of the Persians until that empire fell before Alexander the Great in the latter part of the fourth century B C. From then on they came more directly under Greek influence. Palestine lay between Egypt and Syria, which both had Greek dynasties, and she

fell under the rule of each of them in turn. Many Jews scattered throughout the entire Mediterranean, from Alexandria to Antioch, and westwards right to the Greek mainland and beyond to Italy. Paul's family were Jews who had settled in Tarsus.

In the early part of the second century the Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes, tried to destroy Judaism and to impose a totally Greek system. He sacrificed swine in the Temple at Jerusalem. This provoked the patriotic revolt led by a Jewish family called the Maccabees, which may have been sustained by the stories we read in the book of Daniel. A hundred years later came the Romans, and Palestine was incorporated in the Empire, though the Romans were shrewd enough to leave as much authority as they could in the hands of the Jewish leaders.

The Exile affected world history. The Jews who were scattered took their faith with them. Wherever they went they formed a community, which met for prayer and for reading the sacred writings. Their bond of unity was now not so much a place, though their eyes would always turn to Jerusalem, as an idea, a faith, a way of life. These communities all over the Mediterranean later became the starting-points of the Christian Church. It was to them that Paul first went on his travels. In them the ground was prepared for Christ's good news.

God's Hand in History

*The interpretation of events
revealed in the Old Testament*

IN the early days of the first prophets and teachers the Jews began with the truth that their calling was to obey God, and that in so doing they could, if they chose, avoid trouble and disaster, and secure His plan for the future.

Then had come a growing knowledge of God's justice and judgment, and also of His tender care for His people, and a sense too, that even beyond disobedience and in disaster there was some further Plan.

History is not just a sequence of events, but has a meaning. Jerusalem fell not only because a great imperial power decided to invade it. It fell because its people had rejected their destiny and discarded God's Plan. The prophetic writings do not generally blame the invading power for what happens. It, too, had been allowed to advance as part of the whole scheme. If the Jews had gone from strength to strength in their obedience and

trust the invader might never have come. The prophets insistently proclaim the principle that the place where change, and therefore hope, starts is in ourselves, and in our nation, and that a people's security is in obedience to God.

The blow fell, and evil seemed to triumph. But because some men remained obedient, there came from the heart and the mind of God an even more powerful plan for good. So through the Exile and its pain God was able to reveal to certain of His people a larger purpose in life than success. And in the literature born out of the Exile two truths emerge.

First, a man or a nation may have a destiny of suffering through which other men and other nations come to new life. Read here the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, written, probably, during the Exile, which describes the Suffering Servant of God: 'Surely He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. . . . He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.'

Written over five hundred years before Christ's coming, this passage describes the new destiny and privilege of all God's servants, and above all the mission of Christ Himself. For the great themes of the Old Testament look forward to Him.

Secondly, there began to appear in the Jewish writings the conviction that history would find its fulfilment in some climax, some great act of God. This was called the Messianic Hope, something which included the completion of His full purpose for the universe. Some of the Jews interpreted this in nationalist terms, the restoration of the material Jewish kingdom. But others, like those in the early chapters of St Luke, to whom the first Christmas message came, began to grasp the deeper purpose of God. They read the prophets truly.

This climax is described by some of the prophets, like Zechariah and Malachi, as the great Day of the Lord. It is more easily understood in the later chapters of the book of Isaiah. From all the references certain points emerge. The Day of the Lord is to be a time of moral renaissance. All the nations, indeed all heaven and earth, will have their part in it. All will acknowledge the Messiah's government and rule. It will be an age of plenty and abundance, of untold joy and blessing, of universal peace. It is towards this climax of glory that the process and progress of history inevitably moves.

The Old Testament shows the growth in men's grasp of this philosophy, from the limited conception of a tribal God to an all-embracing world faith. It also shows God's unfailing and progressive Plan for man, a Plan which was repeatedly spoiled by waywardness, lust and self-will, but

which was always framed and reframed to meet man's deepest need. The climax of God's intervention came in His initiative at the first Christmas, at the Cross and at the empty Tomb. It is up to this climax that the movement of the Old Testament leads us.

The story is the greatest of all love and adventure stories, the master romance of God's caring, patience, ingenuity and undeserved giving from age to age. On our side the story adventurously develops not through matter ruthlessly acting and re-acting, as materialism demands; but through what God says to ordinary people and what He does as they choose to obey Him. For it was ordinary people who, with God, wove the pattern of history, and weave it to this day.

Today's challenge is not just to do right and resist wrong. Certain men challenge the rightfulness of what has always been held to be right. They do this not in minor matters only, which are always open to controversy, but in the essentials which are rooted in the conscience of man.

Why is the Old Testament derided by certain people? It is derided because in our 'with it' world it is more deadly to deride than to destroy. Honesty and honour once held and swayed men even beyond the claims of life itself. Today, for many of the older as well as for the younger, the supreme disaster is to be out of line. We are

far more concerned about whom we stand with than about what we stand for.

The reason for the assault is also clear. In the Old Testament Almighty God reigns, not almighty man. We see—if we search—the panorama of a God who fashioned the stars, settled nature's order, and created and controls the symphony of the universe. We see a God who progressively revealed His own nature to the wayward men and women of a people He chose. We see a God who speaks, a God who loves, a God who guards, a God who guides. We see men and women who resisted Him and men and women who said 'yes' to Him. We see what Almighty God and obedient man can achieve in unison together.

The final battle is always the battle for power. Men whose aim is power, power to control other men and events, will always resist God-control. Men who want God-control will discover in their exploration of the Book of Books that with God renaissance is inevitable. They will also discover that He suits, saves and satisfies, that His leading is the thread of meaning in an otherwise meaningless age.

The secret is not just to read about the Bible, but to read the Bible itself. The following outline gives a few of the main points of the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament, and certain widely accepted facts about their dates and composition.

PART TWO

The Books of the Old Testament

GENESIS TO DEUTERONOMY

THESE books reveal the birth and the growth of our belief that:

- 1 Men must be governed by God, or they condemn themselves to be ruled by tyrants.
- 2 Absolute moral standards are at the heart of God's universe, and can, if we choose bravely, guide the living of men and the history of nations.
- 3 There is an eternal struggle between good and evil, in life and in history.
- 4 God constantly works to break into human life with His purposes.
- 5 Those purposes enable men to fulfil their rightful destiny of sacrifice and service, which is the logical fulfilment of being 'made in God's image'.

These themes appear and reappear. They are expressed in various ways. The varieties, even apparent inconsistencies, are their strength.

GENESIS

- Chapters 1 and 2 The creation story.
- 3 The origin of evil.
- 6-9 Man left to himself runs towards evil. It is not of God's creation. The story of Noah and his obedience.
- 11, 26-25, 11 The life of Abraham. Chapter 19 describes the fate of Sodom.
- 25, 19-35 The story of Isaac and Rebekah and their sons Esau and Jacob.
- 37 to end The story of Jacob's sons. Joseph's adventure in Egypt. (Sometimes Jacob is called Israel, e.g. chapter 46, verse 1.)

EXODUS

- Chapters 1-4 The call and early story of Moses.
- 5-13 Moses tackles Pharaoh, the Egyptian king, and challenges him to free the Jewish people. Colossal battles ensue. The escape.
- 14 and 15 Pharaoh pursues them. He learns his lesson.

- 16 God feeds the hungry.
- 20 The Ten Commandments.
- 21-31 God talks with Moses and gives him all kinds of instructions. The Commandments are inscribed on stone tables.
- 31, 12-18 God's view of the Sabbath.
- 32 The people choose their own god while Moses is away. He returns and deals with them. Moses' anger. He breaks the tables.
- 33-4 God again talks to Moses and the Commandments are rewritten in stone.

LEVITICUS

THIS is a book about the Temple of God, its worship and its regulations. In it are also many rules about health and diet.

Chapters 18 and 19 Blunt words on how people are expected to live, and the penalties of wrongdoing. As the Jewish people moved into other lands, among peoples not yet aware of the true God, they needed to live their absolute standards or they would lose them. These chapters are forthright on moral issues. The severity of the penalties may seem out of accord with the way

we think today. But the aim of these chapters is to bring home the eternal fact that evil is evil and brings its own wage with it. There is no date or time limit on chapter 19, 15-18, dealing with the purity of the family and social standards. Chapter 26 states all these issues clearly.

NUMBERS

THE first chapters describe the way the tribes were to be organised, and their various functions.

Chapter 11 This is a human story of what went on in the hearts of the people and in Moses' heart, their leader. There was natural touch with God on practical matters.

20 Water is provided, in a thirsty land.

22-24 The story of Balaam and his ass.

27, 12-23 Moses gets ready to die, and Joshua is commissioned.

DEUTERONOMY

THIS book first summarises the journeyings of the Jewish people after they left Egypt and set out to the land of promise (chapters 1-3). It is

written as if Moses were speaking to his people.

Chapters 4-5 Moses instructs them about their God and once more repeats God's Commandments to them.

6-27 He develops God's orders and instructions to them.

28 A formidable statement of God's blessings on the obedient, and the pains that must befall those who wilfully disobey Him.

29-34 These are the final words of Moses to his people, and in the last chapter there is the account of his death.

THESE five books, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, describe events covering some 700 years, from approximately 2000 to 1300 B C, the period of Hebrew history from Abraham to Moses. They were called the Jewish Law.

They contain many strands of material. Some of these strands, like the second version of the Creation story (which begins in Genesis chapter 2, verse 4), are of a very early date. Others were probably written or revised later on, when editors got to work.

There was a king named Josiah (631 B C), who

organised an extensive programme of reform, and his scholars were among those who worked on the more ancient records. Sometimes stories are duplicated, where there have been two traditions. These books were finally put together in the fifth century before Christ or later, and they were used, written on rolls of papyrus, by the growing numbers of Jewish communities who had by that time spread to many parts of the world.

In all their wealth of material the first five books bring out:

- 1 God's care for the life and destiny of His people, down to the last detail.
- 2 The eternal God is their God, and is the only true God, asking for absolute loyalty from His people.
- 3 His people are called to a life of purity and obedience to God's moral laws, which are clearly given. In return God will faithfully fulfil His promises to them. But disobedience inevitably brings its own judgment.

It may be wishful thinking to imagine that the same truths do not apply to men and to nations today.

JOSHUA

- Chapter 1 Joshua is summoned by God.
'Be strong and of a good
courage.'

- 2-6 He leads the people victoriously forward towards their land. The walls of Jericho fall.
- 7-8 Why battles are lost and why they are won.
- 9-22 Joshua and the people advance into the land of promise and settle there.
- 23-24 Joshua constantly wrestles with the people for God's government. These chapters, describing his final word to them before his death, challenge them to live God's way, personally and nationally. He fearlessly puts decision to them. They must choose (chapter 24, verses 14-18).

JUDGES

THE JUDGES were the tribal chiefs who ruled the people of Israel before they asked for and were given kings. This book describes the temptations of the people in their new land.

Chapter 2, 11-19 The rites of Pagan gods like Ashtaroth, the sex goddess, lured them.

2, 20-23 God lets them feel His anger.

- 6-7 Even in their disobedience God gives the people leaders to save them. Certainly read the story of Gideon in these chapters.
- 14-16 The drama of Samson.

RUTH

THIS is a story about life in Israel at the time of the Judges.

I SAMUEL

- Chapter 1 Story of Samuel's birth. His mother promises him to God.
- 3 Samuel, the boy, looks after Eli, the priest, and God talks to Samuel in the night.
- 4-6 The enemies of the Israelites—the Philistines—capture the ark of God, the sacred emblem of Jewish worship. But it brings them nothing but trouble, so they return it.
- 7 The Israelites repent and change their ways.
- 8-12 The people demand a king. So Samuel is told by God to anoint a man named Saul.
- 13-15 Saul fights many battles, but

- he does not measure up to God's idea of kingship.
- 16 So the boy David is chosen.
- 17 The story of David's battle with Goliath.
- 18 David and Saul's son, Jonathan, become friends.
- 19-24 Saul's jealousy of David, and the dangers David faced. David wrote some of the Psalms when he was being hunted down by Saul. Read, for example, Psalms 18, 57 and 59. Chapter 24 describes David's generosity in sparing Saul. In chapter 26 David spares Saul again.
- 31 The death of Saul.

2 SAMUEL

- Chapter 1 The story of how David received news of Saul's and Jonathan's death. David's lament over them is in verses 19-27.
- 2-6 Description of how, through many battles, David became King over the people, and also (chapter 5, verses 6-12) how he took the important

- step of making Jerusalem his capital, and (chapter 6) of bringing the ark of God there.
- 7 God and David converse together about the destiny of the nation.
- 9 David has a forgiving, generous spirit.
- 11-12 This story of sin and repentance should be read with Psalm 51.
- 13-18 These tell of the sad story of Absalom, David's son.
- 22 This song of deliverance appears also in Psalm 18.
- 23 David's mighty men—whose loyalty is kindled to serve him with faithfulness.

I KINGS

NATHAN the prophet plans for Solomon to succeed David, who was near death.

- Chapter 2 David dies, after forty years' reign. Solomon takes over.
- 3 Solomon makes a pact with Egypt, which shows how his country had grown in power and influence. He asks God

for the gift of an understanding heart. The gift is duly given, as shown in verses 16-28, and in chapter 4, verses 29-34.

- 5 The King of Tyre asks for a pact with Solomon, who has already begun to build the permanent Temple of God at Jerusalem.
- 6-8 The building is described and its dedication. The majesty of it reveals the wealth and power of the nation.
- 9 God promises Solomon His blessing, and also warns him.
- 10 The Queen of Sheba comes.
- 11, 1-25 Solomon disobeys God and puts his women before God. A new figure, Jeroboam, comes on the scene. Solomon's death (verses 41-43).
- 12 This chapter marks a key point in the history. Rehoboam, Solomon's son, who is made king, behaves foolishly, and Jeroboam starts a rebellion, which leads to a division of the kingdom. This division is made more

rigid by Jeroboam (verses 25-33), who establishes pagan worship in his part of the kingdom. From now on there are two kingdoms and two kings. Judah is the Southern Kingdom, with Jerusalem as its capital. The Northern Kingdom is called Israel, and its capital is Samaria.

13-16 The unhappy events that followed.

17-19 In chapter 17 the prophet Elijah appears, while Ahab was King of Israel.

These chapters describe the amazing duel between Elijah and King Ahab and his wife Jezebel.

20-22 The drama goes on. The battle is between God and evil, and the prophet constantly faces the King and the people with this issue: 'How long do you limp between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow Him! If Baal, then follow him' (chapter 18, verse 21).

2 KINGS

- Chapters 1 and 2 Elijah is taken to heaven, and Elisha succeeded him as God's prophet. God constantly raised up fresh prophet voices for His people. The men who listened to God gave the lead that compromising, power-seeking official leaders failed to give.
- 3-10 Here you can read the story of Elisha's battle for the faith of the people. He deals with kings. And he deals with ordinary men and women.
- 13, 14-25 The death of Elisha.
- 17 The Northern Kingdom of Israel rejected God's ways. Meanwhile the great empire of Assyria had risen in the north-east, with its centre at Nineveh, and the warning God and His prophets had so constantly given became a reality. Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, was taken, and its people transported into Assyria. The Israelite cities

- were re-peopled with immigrants brought from the various Assyrian provinces.
- 18-20 Hezekiah rules the Southern Kingdom of Judah, and is faithful to God. The Assyrian king assaults Judah, but by a miracle he is defeated outside Jerusalem. The Southern Kingdom was thus saved from Assyria.
- 22-23 Here is described King Josiah's reign in Jerusalem and his battle for the faith of his people. This re-awakening saved Jerusalem for a generation.
- 24-25 These chapters tell of the failure of the people's resolve and their moral collapse, and their enslavement (in 586 B C) by the Babylonian king.

I CHRONICLES AND 2 CHRONICLES

THESE two books of history cover approximately the same period as the two books of Kings. They were written later than the preceding historical books. The preceding books are more vivid and more factual, perhaps because they came to birth nearer the events they record and describe. The

two books of Chronicles in the way they are written reflect the spirit of a people that has been exiled, and brought back to a different way of life. It may be better to read the books of Kings first.

1 SAMUEL, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings record Israel's progress from about 1050 to 586 B C. They were probably collected and put together in the sixth century. 1 Chronicles and 2 Chronicles may not have reached their present form until the third century B C.

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

IN the year 586 B C the people of Jerusalem were carried off in large numbers to Babylon by the Babylonian armies. Some were left in Jerusalem. But the city was largely destroyed, and the national identity hardly existed any more. In 539 B C King Cyrus became the master of the Babylonian Empire. He followed new policies, and under these policies the Jews were allowed to return to their city and country. Some did return. Others had prospered in Babylon and stayed there. Those who returned had a tough task. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe the return of the Jews to their city, and the rebuilding of their life and their faith in Jerusalem.

Ezra, chapter 1, records Cyrus' decree, and chapter 2 describes the people who returned, probably over a period of many years. Chapters

3 and 4 describe the difficulties and opposition that faced the Jews when they began to rebuild. The prophet Haggai (who has a short book of his own near the end of the Old Testament) encouraged and kindled the people (chapters 5 and 6). Ezra's own profound prayer to God is in chapter 9, verses 5-15.

The book of Nehemiah rigorously and vividly describes the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem by a force of Jews who were allowed by King Artaxerxes to return from Babylon to Jerusalem (444 B C). Chapters 4-6 illuminate the opposition they met, and why it came.

ESTHER

THIS book shows the impact that the Jews who lived their faith made in their exile in Babylon. They reached high office. Esther became queen. And it was the result of their abilities and the way they lived and the standards they kept. There is courage and drama in this story, as well as cruelty and intrigue.

JOB

JOB may be valuably read in the Revised Version, or in Moffatt's translation. Each person can draw from it their own understanding of its truth. It deals with human suffering, faith in God's power

and providence, and the right of God to work His will in the world.

In structure the greater part of the book (chapters 3-41) is Hebrew poetry, some of it very old, written in majestic language. Job, the righteous man of wealth and prosperity, is visited by pain and disaster. Will he continue to trust God or not? Will he blame God? Or can God do what He chooses with His own? These matters are discussed in a sort of seminar between Job and his friends. At certain places God Himself intervenes.

- Chapters 1 and 2 These chapters set the scene.
- 3 The dialogue begins. The friends argue with each other. Job's speeches represent the struggles of a soul to let God permeate his deep emotions and the stark logic of his sufferings.
- 19 Job declares his faith, and in verses 25 and 26 he hints at a faith in immortality—a passage chosen by Handel to express this theme in *The Messiah*.
- 23 Job quests for God.
- 28 Written in praise of wisdom, and wisdom in the Old Testament is regarded as the

essence of God Himself. It means moral truth, not just knowing more.

38-41 Here is God's proclamation to Job, in the high glory of Hebrew poetry.

42 The finale of the story.

THE PSALMS

THE PSALMS put into words the deepest experience of the human spirit. They are timeless poems. And the great thing is to read them regularly, learn some of them, like Psalm 23, by heart and make them your friend. To begin with, read Psalms 1, 22, 23, 27, 37, 46, 51, 84, 100, 103, 114, 137.

Many of these Psalms were written by David. Some were drawn from him in response to events in his life. Psalm 37 reflects his days of persecution. Psalm 51 is the outpouring of pain and joy at sin seen and forgiven (the events referred to are in 2 Samuel, chapters 11 and 12).

Other Psalms, like Psalm 137, were written during the years when the Jewish people were in exile in Babylon, in the sixth century B C. Others bear the mark of later writing or revision, and became more formal songs for services in the Jewish places of worship. Psalm 119 was assembled for this purpose (verse 165 can be learned by heart). Psalms 90 and 91 are great affirmations of

God's providence. (Psalm 90 is enshrined in the hymn, 'O God, our help in ages past'.)

This book of songs was probably put together, much of it from far earlier material, in the second century B C. The Psalms are written in Hebrew poetic form and rhythm, which can be seen in the two parallel phrases which form each verse.

PROVERBS

THE BOOK of Proverbs is a collection of pithy, wise sayings which are often as relevant now as they were when first written. Many of them were as traditional as our own proverbs. Some may have been coined or collected by King Solomon. The collection as a whole was made by the wise men of Israel, perhaps as late as the fourth century B C.

The first seven chapters are addressed to sons.

Chapter 3, 5-6 Worthy to be learned by heart.

7 As modern as ever it was.

8-9 In praise of wisdom, as a God-given quality. See especially chapter 9, verse 10: 'The fear of the Lord is the starting point of wisdom.'

10 Sin is foolish and straight living sensible.

This theme continues through to the end of

chapter 19. Read also chapter 31, verses 10-31, which is a chapter for the women of every age.

The book of Ecclesiastes that follows Proverbs pursues these ideas of worldly wisdom, and is a sort of deposit of practical maxims born of Jewish life around the fourth and third centuries B C.

THE SONG OF SOLOMON

THIS is a love poem which we can, if we wish, interpret allegorically to represent the love later manifested between Christ and His Church. The Bible contains much material which is unexplained, and which is left to the interpretation of the individual reader. For some people this book has represented, symbolically, God's love. The New Testament speaks of the Church as Christ's Bride (Revelation 21, verses 2 and 9). Other people see the Song of Solomon as an Eastern love poem.

WE NOW COME to the prophetic books in the Old Testament, the writings left to us by men who were summoned by God to speak His truth, welcome or unwelcome, to the country. Note:

- 1 These men needed a miracle of bold decision to say 'yes' to God. Read Isaiah 6. It required a painful coal of fire to open his lips. He spoke out not because of his merits but because of

God's choice. Read Jeremiah 1. Jeremiah kicks at God's call. Read Amos 7, verses 14-17.

- 2 These men spoke for God and from God. But they loved their people. They had a keen sense of the destiny and rôle of their people if obedience to God were real.
- 3 They spoke out to the ordinary folk. And they were also firm and faithful friends to kings and rulers. They did not trim their truth to suit circumstances or win favour. They risked everything. In chapter 37 of Jeremiah the prophet is gaoled and accused of being a traitor because he warns king and people that the Babylonians (called Chaldeans) will destroy Jerusalem. God's men were painfully clear on the signs of the times.
- 4 The prophets repeatedly made it plain that it is never too late for a man or a people to change their ways, and that the moment they do so a fresh, constructive and glorious plan of God starts to operate.

ISAIAH

CHAPTERS 1-39 mostly come from the prophet Isaiah himself, who lived at the close of the eighth century BC. He was the friend and adviser of King Hezekiah of Jerusalem at a critical period.

- Chapter 1 God's challenge to Jerusalem.
 2 Makes clear God's positive

- promise, but only if ways are changed.
- 6 The story of Isaiah's own call and decision.
- 9 This passage has, through the centuries, been interpreted as the prophet looking ahead to Christ's coming.

In reading from this book we can remember that in size the Israelites were a small nation, and they had the powerful country of Egypt on one side and the Empire of Assyria on the other. Isaiah lived in these realities. God, through His prophets, often warned His people not to make an alliance with Egypt against Assyria. Isaiah's statesmanship is seen in chapter 30 on this issue. Verse 15 is a fundamental one.

- 35 The proclamation of Isaiah's picture of God's new world for the children of obedience.
- 36-39 Here is the story of the Assyrian assault on Jerusalem and how Isaiah, the prophet, and Hezekiah, the king, working together, foiled the Assyrian emperor's plan, and saved Jerusalem for more than a hundred years.
- 40-55 Written in the last part of the sixth century by the unnamed

prophet-poet who shared with the Jews their exile in Babylon.

- 40 This reaffirms the glory of God in a message of hope to the people. Be sure to read this chapter.
- 41 The prophet encourages the people. Verses 6 and 7 are for today.
- 42, 1-12 Certainly read these verses.
- 47 The doom of Babylon—which surely fell.
- 53 Here develops the truth that a suffering minority who do what God tells them can become His weapon to bring truth to the world. Handel chose verses in this chapter to portray the sacrifice that brings healing to others.
- 55 Do not miss this chapter. It summons everyone to come and share in the joyful deliverance God freely offers, and to find meat for the body and adventure for the mind.

Chapters 56-66 are a glorious affirmation of God's promises. They may have been written later when the Jews were again in Jerusalem.

Particularly read chapters 60 and 61. In Luke 4, verses 18-19, Jesus uses Isaiah 61, verses 1 and 2, as the charter and purpose of His coming.

JEREMIAH

JEREMIAH spoke out to the people and their rulers in the years immediately before the Babylonian emperor captured Jerusalem (586 B C). When many of the Jews were swept off to Babylon, Jeremiah stayed and served those who were left behind.

Jeremiah is a human person who freely reveals his feelings.

- Chapter 1 God summons him. In verse 6 he answers God back.
- 4, 19-23 He pours his soul out in pain for his people.
- 6, 13-16 He assaults those who talk of 'peace where there is no peace' and who think to 'heal the hurt of My people lightly'.
- 8, 18-9, 1 He aches to bring healing and help, and to answer the people's waywardness.

His book has many vivid images. Read chapter 18, verses 1-12. where Jeremiah visits the potter; chapter 24 on the two baskets of figs; chapters 27 and 28 on the sign of the yokes.

21 Jeremiah's clear challenge to

- the people. King Zedekiah of Jerusalem consults him and he speaks out.
- 23 This is forcefully directed against so-called pastors and prophets who adjust God's truth to suit their own way of life.
- 29, 1-14 Shows how Jeremiah carried his exiled fellow-countrymen on his heart.
- 31 God makes His new promise to the people of Israel. Read particularly verses 31-34.
- 36 A drama of battle between Jeremiah and the king of Jerusalem, who refused to face God's facts.
- 38 This describes more persecution and imprisonment of Jeremiah and the courage of an African servant who rescued him. The king again asked Jeremiah for the truth. Then, as now, men wanted to know the truth but did not want to accept it.
- 40 onwards Jeremiah speaks to the Jews left behind in Jerusalem after the city had been captured by the Babylonians.

- 43 Describes how they took Jeremiah off to Egypt. The glowing fact is that whatever happened and wherever he went or was taken, he fearlessly proclaimed what he believed to be God's truth.
- 45 onwards Jeremiah tackles the surrounding nations and the invading powers. He forthrightly tells them that God's anger is directed against all who fight against His purposes and His plans.
- 52 The final chapter recapitulates the story of the fall of Jerusalem and the carrying off of the king and the responsible men and women to Babylon.

EZEKIEL

EZEKIEL (chapter 1, verse 1) was among those taken away to Babylon. He seems to have been part of the first deportation, carried out by King Nebuchadnezzar, described in 2 Kings 24, verses 11-16.

Much of Ezekiel's book is symbolic and hard to grasp or understand. But certain parts challenge and stimulate our modern minds.

- Chapter 2 God's pungent words to him in calling him for His work.
- 3 Ezekiel is told to eat the roll on which God's words are written. This suggests that his truth is meant to become part of him. Verses 10-21 reaffirm his commission direct from God's Spirit.
- II, 14-20 God's word of hope and promise to the exiles—a heart transplant—a heart of flesh instead of a heart of stone.
- 13 An assault upon false prophets who mislead people with compromise.
- 37, 1-14 Read and study the truth of this promise—that God alone is able and eager to make dry bones live.

DANIEL

THIS BOOK is the story of a young Jewish captive during the Exile in Babylon, who stood firm and finally rose to a position of power as adviser to the emperor.

There are many obscure passages in the book. But the stories are of great interest and full of drama. Think of them as written to encourage the Jewish people in their times of suffering and

difficulty. The book may have been written as late as the second century B C. Some scholars think it was written nearer the time of the Exile.

One purpose the book fulfilled was to strengthen the Jews when the Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes, attacked Jerusalem and outraged all the sacred truths of tradition and faith by defiling the Temple in 168 B C.

Chapters 1-3 These give you the flavour of Daniel's story, and include Daniel's interpretation of the king's dream, the three men in the white hot furnace and the story of the honour done to Daniel.

Whatever the date or implications of Daniel's life and adventures, he portrays fearless courage and a determination to proclaim the true God to the foreign land where he was exiled. These men made their mark through their faith.

5 Account of the event of the writing on the wall at King Belshazzar's banquet, and Daniel's bold interpretation of it. He was proved right.

The kings referred to in the book are figures in history. The story in chapter 6, Daniel in the den of lions, is set in the reign of the Median king, Darius, who took over Belshazzar's kingdom.

HOSEA

HOSEA writes in the eighth century B C. The Assyrians, who failed to take Jerusalem in the south, were then attacking the Northern Kingdom, whose capital was Samaria. They took it.

Hosea speaks of God's undying love for His people. He uses the image of an adulterous wife, chapter 2, verses 5-8. Israel has been unfaithful to her Lord. Yet God will forgive and heal, if men repent—read chapter 6, verses 1-3. Also read chapter 11, verses 1-4, and chapter 14, verses 1-7.

The love of Israel's God shines through the tough challenge of Hosea. God suffers when men sin.

(If you read this book, 'Ephraim' normally means 'Israel', ie the Northern Kingdom. 'Asshur' is Assyria.)

JOEL

JOEL, about 800 B C, spoke out at a time when there was a plague of locusts in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. This meant famine and hardship. Joel challenges the people to turn Godwards.

Read chapter 2, from verse 12 to the end, in which he proclaims God's hope for a changing nation, including economic prosperity and the

gift (verses 28-29) of God's miracle-working Spirit which will be outpoured on the earth. (See Acts 2, verses 16-21, in which Peter quotes Joel at the first Pentecost.)

AMOS

AMOS is the first of the prophetic books in date, since Elijah and Elisha and earlier prophets, such as Nathan, who challenged King David, left no books of their own.

Amos prophesied in the Northern Kingdom, and warned them of what must befall unless they made God their standard and their guide.

For Amos' account of himself, read chapter 7, verses 14 and 15. He writes vividly, as a herdsman might be expected to do. Read chapter 3, verses 1-8, for his outspoken truth to Israel, and chapter 5, verses 14 and 15. Read also his indictment of the selfishness and oppression of the privileged in chapter 8, verses 4-12. The penalty will be 'a famine of hearing the words of the Lord'. In chapter 7, verses 8-17, Amos talks of 'God's plumbline'. This infuriates one of the top priests, who complains to the king that such truth is more than the people can bear!

Amos was a blunt, simple man, a worker in the fields, who arrested the attention of his country by crossing the will of rulers and people with God's will.

JONAH

ANYONE who concentrates on the historical accuracy of the story of the whale and Jonah will miss the humanity and the purpose of Jonah's story. In 2 Kings 14, verse 25, Jonah is referred to as an historical figure.

God told Jonah to take His challenge and answer to Nineveh, the symbol of a pagan world, and capital of the Assyrian Empire. Jonah went off in the opposite direction. The faithful so often resist being asked by God to take the faith to the world that is without faith. A people as well as a person can resist in this way. Israel as a nation jibbed at the price of being God's messenger.

See the reference by Jesus to Jonah in Matthew 12, verses 38-42.

MICAH

MICAH was a robust prophet in Jerusalem at the time of King Hezekiah, about 750 B.C. In Jeremiah 26, verses 1-19, Micah is quoted by one of Jeremiah's friends as one who spoke out for God.

Read chapter 4, verses 1-8, for a picture of God's idea of the world. And in chapter 5, verse 2, come the words quoted in Matthew 2, verses 5 and 6, about Christ's Birth in Bethlehem. Micah's God (chapter 7, verse 18) pardons iniquity and rejoices in mercy.

HABAKKUK

HABAKKUK was probably a prophet of the last years of the seventh century, though a reference to him discovered in the Dead Sea Scrolls makes it possible that the forces he refers to who will attack an unrepentant Israel were the armies of Alexander the Great in the fourth century. In this case he wrote two or more centuries later.

Read chapter 2, verses 1-4 and verse 14. And read Habakkuk's prayer (chapter 3). It is a mighty affirmation of faith. The faith of these men was tested in the fire.

HAGGAI

HAGGAI spoke out to the exiles who returned from Babylon to Jerusalem at the end of the sixth century. Chapter 2, verses 1-9, describe the coming expansion of their faith. Chapter 1, verse 12, shows how the rising rulers obeyed the prophet.

ZECHARIAH

THIS BOOK comes from the time when Jerusalem was being rebuilt after the Exile (about 520 B C). Zechariah addresses the people in visions, not unlike Bunyan in *Pilgrim's Progress*, who constantly says, 'And I saw in my dream . . .' Some

of these are obscure. But the high priest could not fail to understand chapter 3, verses 1-7.

Chapter 7, 8-14 Gives reasons why people's prayers were not answered.

8 Gives the picture of prosperity if men obey. A God-led city can be the centre of the earth. Read the promise in chapter 12, verse 10—a verse which is referred to in John 19, verse 37.

13, 6-7 These verses were naturally referred later to the Crucified One, and Jesus Himself quotes them in Matthew 26, verse 31.

MALACHI

THE NAME means, in Hebrew, 'My Messenger'. Malachi was written about 400 B.C. There has come into the faith a universality which begins to show itself (chapter 1, verse 11).

Chapter 2, 17 Lights up God's idea of people who reveal a gap between words and ways.

3-4 Point to the climax of God's intentions for His people.