Foundations for Ministry

Unit One:

This is Our Story

Prepared for the Local Ministry Department
by
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Unit 1: This is Our Story

Aims of this Unit:

- To encourage and equip you to describe your own journey in faith;
- To explore the place of worship and the Bible in Christian discipleship;
- To develop your understanding of the Old Testament;
- To relate the faith story of you and your Christian community to that of believers through all ages.

Contents:

- Session 1: Telling my story
- Session 2: Prayer and worship
- Session 3: The Bible
- Session 4: The Story of the Old Testament
- Session 5: Family histories
- Session 6: A new start
- Session 7: Messages and demands
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- Session 9: Poems and proverbs

Introducing Foundations for Ministry

This study course has been designed with two aims in mind:

1. to provide a one-year foundation course for potential candidates for Ministry in the Diocese of Lichfield
2. to offer to people involved in a wide range of ministries in and beyond their local church a basic introduction to Biblical studies and Christian theology.

Students who complete Foundations for Ministry successfully should be able to demonstrate –

- a growing understanding of the biblical and historical tradition of the church and its implications for and reference to Christian discipleship
- a growing capacity for theological reflection on their own experience, including work, family, relationships etc.
- a growing awareness of the student’s own potential for contributing to the mission and ministry of their local church

The course consists of three Study Units, each with nine sessions,
and is designed to be studied by groups in local churches. The level of learning is similar to that of the Bishop’s Certificate Course and the material may be adapted by the leader to suit the needs of each group.

**Unit 1: This is Our Story** relates the faith stories of the group members to the story of the people of God as told in the Old Testament.

**Unit 2: Jesus and His story** continues the narrative to include the witness of the New Testament.

**Unit 3: Past Forward** explores the relationship between personal faith and theology from the Christian past into the future.

**Further reading:**

For the first unit, the following books are strongly recommended:

- *Spirituality Handbook* David Runcorn SPCK 2006
  An excellent and practical introduction to many forms of Christian spirituality.

- *What is the Bible?* John Barton SPCK
  A guide to the Bible which describes how different parts of scripture came to be written and explores the different types of literature within the Bible.

  Fully revised with fresh articles and graphics, this handbook unwraps more clearly for non-experts the mysteries of ancient scriptures, providing instant access to information from a range of sources. It reveals the relevance of the context for the writings and sheds light on why there are different interpretations.

- *How to read the Bible for all its worth* G. D Fee and D. Stuart Zondervan 2003
  A guide to Biblical interpretation.

- *Introduction to the Old Testament* John Drane Lion Hudson 2000
  Provides an excellent and informative introduction to the Old Testament and is illustrated throughout with maps, charts and photographs.

**Assessment:** At the end of each unit is a reflection sheet for every member of the group to complete. This is designed to enable group members to assess their own learning and its effect on their discipleship and ministry.

Students may also complete a written assignment of
Worship: It is expected that each group meeting will contain a time of corporate prayer. Some suggestions have been given for this, particularly in the early weeks, but groups are encouraged to decide what is most suitable for them. Some groups will like to begin with prayer, others end with it, some like to break in the middle. Some prefer formality, others informality - and so on.

Not all the questions in each session have to be covered. You may select aspects that are of particular interest to your group, or especially relevant to your parish history. The questions are designed as a springboard for your thinking and group discussions, not as a straitjacket.
Session 1

Telling my Story

Aims:

- To grow in understanding of each person’s journey of faith
- To explore some of the variety of Christian experience.

Preparing for the session

1. Read through “Stories” below:

Stories

Most of us organise our thoughts into stories most of the time. Whenever we communicate with another person, we tell stories, when we wonder about the deepest things of life; who we are or what we should do, stories of our past shape our self-understanding and our decisions.

If you think that is rather too bold a statement try to observe yourself and other people. How do you describe one friend to another, except by telling a story about something they have done? How do parents talk about their children’s emerging personality? Politicians make a case for changes by choosing an example of someone affected by the Health Service, schools or transport. Newspapers and television report how an item in the news will have an impact on an individual or family.

In this unit we look at our own story of faith in order to grow in our understanding of the people and events that have shaped us. We then look at the history of the people of God before the coming of Jesus. Especially in times of doubt and uncertainty they gathered their stories of the past to assure themselves of God’s faithfulness in the past and of His promises for the future. Their stories became the way that they knew their identity as God’s people. There were stories of Kings and Queens, battles and court intrigue, stories of exile and ownership, prosperity and hardship. The stories of the mighty are complemented by the stories of ordinary people, such as Ruth and Naomi.

Stories are powerful because they invite participation. They encourage the listener, or reader, to identify with some characters and react against others. They engage our emotions as well as our minds. They offer possibilities rather
than laying down absolutes; in an age like ours, when reasoned arguments and lectures have little credibility, a story can communicate far more effectively. They can be open-ended and invite the audience to think about how they would act in the circumstances described. Stories can work in someone’s unconscious, giving shape to their thoughts about themselves, others and God. This can be an influence for good or bad; these pictures that are formed in our heads by stories are very hard to shift.

The relationship of stories to what actually happened is a complex one. In the Bible there are clearly some stories that are presented as history, some as parable and some as myth. All are true in their way - but argument rages over the classification of many passages. Those who disagree accuse the other of not taking the Bible seriously. There may be a belief that stories about events that really happened are more powerful than those which did not. It is rarely possible to be sure about the extent to which events of the past are recorded accurately - even news of what is happening in our world at the moment is hotly disputed - and so stories, whether claiming historical accuracy or not, cannot stand alone as our only means of knowing about God. Within the Bible, and for the following generations of believers, stories have been complemented by laws and creedal statements. These may not speak as powerfully to our emotions, but they act as a reference and, perhaps, a check on our imaginations.

In the Old Testament, for example, one often finds the words “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love.” (eg Psalm 103: 8, Ps 86: 15,) Jonah complains that God is like this, and shows mercy to those who have wronged Him,( Jonah 4:2), while the same words are words of blessing (Numbers 6: 25). Stories that may appear to suggest that God is not like this (and there are plenty in the Bible) have to be tested against this statement of faith.

The interplay between fact and fiction, story and creed continues through the Old Testament and is still a creative dynamic today. Part of your stories that have shaped your faith will be historically true, some may be tales you heard that have come alive in your imagination. The creeds that we recite form a boundary and a framework for adventures in prayer and preaching.

When we join the Christian Church we become part of a community of believers, who have shared stories about God through many generations. It is an enrichment of our understanding of God when we see that our experience is not comprehensive, that other cultures and other times have also discovered the ways of God in their lives. Sometimes their situations seem similar in some ways to ours, sometimes the distance that is between us and them demonstrates the extent of God’s love and power. As connections and contrasts are made, their story becomes our story.

2. Consider the story of your Christian faith. Can you identify times when you believed yourself particularly blessed by God? Can you remember people who helped you, who set an example or who had wise words to say? Are there places which are particularly sacred for you? Is there a creative form; music,
drama; dance or poetry, for example, that is especially helpful to you in your Christian faith?

Many believers, both in the Bible and since, have seen our lives as a journey, a pilgrimage of faith. We are seekers after truth, not the possessors of it. And our journey will not be completed in this life.

Thinking back over your life, try to identify those times of development in your faith. There may be times of barrenness as well as of blessing; consider these as well. Try to draw a time chart of your journey, beginning from your birth and include in it people, places and situations that have been an influence on you.

Though this is primarily for your own enrichment, be prepared to share some of this with the group. Prepare at least one story that describes an incident in your life that illustrates the way that you have seen God working in your life.
Group Work

Sharing your story

1. Some, or all, of the group may already know each other well, but it will still be useful to introduce yourselves. Going round the group, each person says their name, and their church if there are a number of churches represented. Then explain, in a few words, why you have decided to start this course.

Each other’s stories

2. Each group member has three uninterrupted minutes to tell the story of how faith began and grew in them.

The group leader is responsible for keeping people strictly to time. Any prompting or asking of questions should be done by the leader, with the aim of clarifying the story and affirming the story-teller. The right of group members not to tell their story if they don’t want to must be strictly respected.

The aims of this exercise are:

- To help you learn more about the rich variety of God’s ways with people.
- To enable you to learn more about Christian listening – make sure you listen hard to what the others are saying, not spending your energies in working out what you’re going to say when your turn comes.

Experiencing God

3. Use the work you have done on your “life-map” to discuss the following questions:

- How are you each aware of God in your lives now?
- What particular things – places, circumstances, people, events, or whatever – trigger your awareness of God?

The reading at the end of this session (which is optional, to be done at home after the session) looks at the roots of religious experience. The following questions are intended to start you thinking about this subject.

4. In the same groups, discuss the following questions:

- People often say that they don’t need to go to church to experience God – they can meet God in the garden, on the moors, or through listening to sublime pieces of music. Do you think this is an adequate way of experiencing God, or is something more needed? If so, what might that be, and why do you think it’s needed?
Our own awareness of God

5. Reflect together on some (or all!) of the following questions:

- Why do some activities, situations and states of mind trigger our awareness of God, while others don’t?
- What contribution towards my present-day awareness of God is made by the following:
  - the things I learned as a child?
  - the expectations of my family?
  - the expectations of my friends?
  - the expectation of other Christians in my church?
  - the world of nature?
  - previous experiences of God?
- What does God feel like to me mostly? (e.g. God may feel mostly powerful, distant, loving, punishing, forgiving, judging, providing – or whatever is most true for you).
- Why does God feel like this to me?
- What things make me feel most sure of God?
- What things make me doubt God?

Reflections

6. If the session has raised memories, subjects or issues for anyone, they can, if they wish, share this with the whole group.

The session ends with a time of prayer, in which members can thank God for each other, and for the wealth of variety of Christian experience.
Reading to Follow up the Session

After the session, try to find time to read ‘The Roots of Religious Experience’ below.

The following books might also be helpful if you wish to explore the subject further:

Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild (eds), Conversations – Meeting our Forebears in Faith, SPCK, 1997.

This contains short passages from Christians throughout history, and, using brief reflections and prayers, encourages us to ‘talk’ to them about our own Christian experience.

Lance Pierson Storytelling - a practical guide. SU 1997

Sandra Pollerman Stories, stories everywhere The Bible Reading Fellowship 2001

Two excellent books about how to tell stories, with many examples of the reasons for their effectiveness.

C. Bartholomew, M. Goheen The drama of Scripture – finding our place in the Biblical story SPCK 2006 Just as it says!

The Roots of Religious Experience

Where does our experience of God come from in the first place?

In every age, and in every place in the world, people have seen signs of the active presence of powers or beings beyond the physical world. They have recognised that certain places, objects, people, or times of year, are somehow ‘god-filled’, or holy. Societies often venerate things which reflect important aspects of people’s lives – for example, farming communities recognised divine activity in the rhythm of the seasons; tribes of coastal fishermen recognised it in migrations of fish, and in the moods of the sea.

When Moses met God in the burning bush (Exodus 3:1–7), he was told to take off his shoes, ‘for the place on which you stand is holy’ – an example of how people respond to an encounter with God. Meeting the holy demands a special response, an act of worship, a recognition of the otherness of God.

Holy places?

The idea of a place being holy may seem rather distant from the way we see things today. But consider the effect of a proposal to alter, or (worse still) to close, the parish church – in many places such a suggestion would arouse a storm of protest.

Not all such feelings arise from a sense of worship. They may also be about resistance to change, and the feeling that the church building stands for
continuity in a changing and uncertain world. But there is often a deep, underlying attachment to a building which seems to represent ‘otherness’ – the divine presence – in a world which doesn’t have much room for God. Such feelings may hint at an unspoken awareness of God, which most people wouldn’t even acknowledge. It may be closer to superstition than to faith – but its roots lie in the religious awareness that is part of human experience.

Is this perhaps the lowest rung of the ladder of spiritual experience? Is it possible to climb from here to the full experience of faith in Jesus Christ? Or is it, on the other hand, opposed to the very heart of what Jesus Christ truly means?

Some people see Christian faith as just one aspect all human religious experience. Others believe that it is unique, the result of God the Holy Spirit making himself known to people in a special way that is not part of ordinary human consciousness.

Organised religion

In almost all human societies, the sense of the holy becomes the basis for a position of leadership, power and control, exercised by a few. In most societies, a group of witch doctors, holy men or priests emerges, which organises and manages the way in which the community experiences God. This group defines what is ‘right’ to believe and do, and so creates an organised religion by controlling the things that trigger awareness of God.

At the same time, the members of this priestly group often end up by taking over responsibility for being religious from everyone else! People are often uncomfortable with direct exposure to the holy, and are very willing for someone else to do it for them. So the priestly group devises certain rituals which reduce the heat of this discomfort. By taking part in these rituals, ordinary people find their experience of the holy is somehow contained and made manageable.

In this way organised religion can become the enemy of spiritual experience. It no longer triggers a real experience of God. The Old Testament is full of examples of this, especially in the writings of the prophets, who kept insisting in one way or another that ‘to obey is better than sacrifice’ (1 Samuel 15:22).

Jesus’ attitudes

What was Jesus’ attitude to organised religion, and the things which trigger religious experience? On one hand, he continued in the tradition of the prophets, attacking the religious practices of his day. He criticised the most religious people (the Pharisees), attacked the religious institutions (the sabbath), and even called into question the holiness of the most sacred place (the Temple). Like the prophets, he pointed to the importance of a genuine experience of God, rather than mere religious observance.

And yet he worshipped in the synagogue and the Temple, he observed the great festivals of the Jewish faith, he threw the money-changers out of the Temple in order to enable more people to worship there. He even set up a pattern of religious observance of his own (the Eucharist), and he sowed the seeds of a Church which quickly grew. And like any other community of humans, a Church needs structure, organisation and a programme. In this way the Christian faith focuses in its sharpest form the tension between spiritual experience and organised religion.
Varieties of spiritual experience
We can see this very clearly if we think about the variety of ways in which people come to faith in Jesus Christ. In most cases the Church plays some part, often enabling a person to experience something of Jesus’ own character or concerns, or showing us what following him might mean.
Yet the Church also suffers from the problem of organised religion. It’s all too easy for the performance of religious acts to become a substitute for real spiritual experience. Some churches have regular worshippers who don’t expect to have a living encounter with God through Jesus. Many churches find themselves ministering to people who want no more than a well-performed ritual to mark a moment of change in their lives – like birth, marriage and death. All churches must face the challenge of Jesus – who would be the target of his religious criticisms today, if not the Church?
And yet, encounter with God must start somewhere, and for some people spiritual experience is triggered by their contact with the holy through baptism, marriage or a funeral. For others, however, this may happen outside the community of the Church – an experience of love or beauty may become a doorway into the presence of God. For yet others it may happen through personal contact with a member of the family of faith, or in some other way. But for everyone, as experience of God develops, an increasing number of things will trigger the awareness of God’s presence and significance. The most obvious thing about the Christian experience of God is its variety. ‘God breaketh not all hearts alike.’ (Richard Baxter, pastor and visionary, living in the 17th Century).
**Aims**

- To explore different ways in which communication with God is possible, through prayer and worship.
- To examine what makes authentically Christian worship,
- To discover new possibilities in prayer and to deepen our experience of worship.

**Preparing for the Session**

1. Read through “Prayer - an introduction”

**Prayer – An Introduction**

**What is prayer?**

Prayer is way in which we express our relationship of faith. Through prayer, we consciously (and often unconsciously) put into thoughts, words and actions what it means to trust God.

Prayer is, in this sense, like the love between two lovers: as the years pass, their love takes many forms, and receives all kinds of different expressions. At different times, most lovers experience a whole range of emotional communication, from the gentlest and most intimate to the stormiest and most passionate.

So it is with prayer. We pray first, and consider what we are doing afterwards. Just as many people find it difficult to put their experience of love into words, so prayer can often only be described with difficulty and confusion. And this can be a problem because it sometimes leads to guilt.

Guilt about prayer can come from lots of directions. Probably most Christians feel some guilt about their prayer-life, and this makes us reluctant to expose the reality of our prayers to others.

As with so many aspects of Christian discipleship, we tend to hide behind this difficulty – so our experience of prayer becomes weakened and impoverished as a result. Trying to put into words what we think we are doing when we pray can help us to explore new avenues of this expression of our relationship with God.

What, then is prayer?
1. Conversation with God

At its simplest, prayer is conversation with God. We put into words our hopes, our fears, our joys, our sorrows. God is the listener, and anyone who has ever been listened to properly will know the value of a listener. To be able to pour our heart out in words to one who listens can be a vital stage in knowing how to respond to our circumstances.

In the past this talking to God has sometimes been described in language drawn from the palace. Those who talked to God were compared to lowly peasants approaching a great emperor. They came as ‘petitioners’, and had to do so according to the proper forms.

As with so many of our errors about prayer, there is just enough truth in this picture of God to make it hard to avoid. For although God is a great king, what matters about prayer is that he is close to us. He is the one whom Jesus taught us to address not as ‘Majesty’ but as ‘abba’. As Paul remarks in Romans 8, this form of address to God (and all that it implies about our relationship) is itself the evidence, given by the Holy Spirit, of the reality of that relationship (verses 15, 16).

In the same passage, Paul points to a God so close to us in prayer that he is within us: for, ‘we do not know how to pray . . . but the Holy Spirit himself is pleading for us with sighs too deep for words’ (v.26). Sometimes words seem pointless, facile or irrelevant in our attempts to talk to God, and it may be helpful to remember that it is the Spirit’s work in our lives to bring about a deeper communion with God not dependant on our power to express ourselves in words.

As in any relationship, conversation is a two-way communication. We don’t spend all the time talking to God – we should spend some time listening to him too. God doesn’t, of course, talk to us in the same way that another human being does – and because of that, many Christians forget to leave space and time for listening to God, making the prayer relationship very one-sided. Donald Coggan, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote: ‘Christians believe in a God who speaks. Ours is not a silent God, a God who sits, sphinx-like, looking out unblinking on a world in agony . . . He speaks because he loves. Love always seeks to communicate’ (quoted in Listening, by Anne Long, DLT 1990).

2. Answers to prayer

How, then, does God communicate with us, and answer our prayers? By ‘answers to prayer’, many people mean the specific events in their lives or those of others, which happen in the way they want them to, and have asked God that they should.

But the fact that God can and does answer prayers like this should not limit us to thinking only about answers of this sort. Indeed, we must be very careful with this picture of prayer, which can easily spill over into a kind of magic. To use prayer like this turns it into an attempt to bend God to our purposes – whereas prayer is actually the means by which we become identified with his purposes.

Christians are often conscious of God’s presence in their prayers, and may experience a wide range of kinds of response when they leave space to listen – responses which range from affirmation and comfort to uncertainty and isolation. Sometimes one course of action may clearly seem the way to go. At other times, something said by a fellow-Christian, read in the Bible, or heard in church, may return with particular force during our prayer-times. There are all sorts of ways in which we experience God’s voice, and it is always a good idea to leave space in our prayers for such responses.
3. Thinking about God
Talking to God can lead on to thinking about him. God knows our thoughts, so words are not necessary for prayer, though we often need them to help us know what we are actually thinking! Such reflection – upon God, upon passages of Scripture, and upon ourselves and our lives – is an important aspect of prayer. There is a danger, however, that such prayer, having begun in the mind, will also end there. Prayer must affect our wills and our feelings as well as our minds, and such reflective prayer will be helped if it concludes with some act of adoration or thanksgiving, and with some definite commitment to action.

4. Prayer as relationship
We have already suggested that prayer is the expression of our relationship with God, and this idea follows on from those of talking and listening to God, and thinking about him – but takes us more deeply into the meaning of prayer. A relationship doesn't stop when talking ceases; it can sometimes be expressed most satisfyingly through total silence. If we are pleased, we can share our pleasure and joy with God; if afraid, our fear and anxiety; if tired, our exhaustion, and so on. And in doing so we sense God's response to us, of participation in joy, of comfort in pain, of reliability in need.

5. Prayer as response
It's easy to think of prayer as a conversation which begins when we start it – something we initiate. At a deeper level, however, prayer is started by God: prayer is part of our response to all that God has done in and through Jesus. Here is the link between personal prayer and the corporate life of the whole Church. Faith (including prayer) is our individual response to the gospel. As the community of the faithful, the Church responds to the gospel too, by its life and witness (again including prayer). So we never pray solely as individuals. Our prayers are always part of the continuing prayer of the Church.

6. Prayer and action
Whether prayer is individual or corporate, it remains incomplete if it does not result in action. Without action, prayer can never be more than a pious exercise in self-indulgence. On one side, prayer expresses our faith-relationship; on the other side, prayer must lead to the same thing as faith – that is, active discipleship – if it is to be fully Christian. Prayer for the sick, for example, means nothing if we do nothing to care for those sick who are close to us. Prayers for the poor and hungry are empty words unless we practice moderation ourselves, and give as we can to the relief of need. Prayer for God's strength in our own distress implies our willingness to venture out as confidently as we are able. Prayer for God's forgiveness for some failure or mistake is self-delusion unless it includes our willingness to do what we can to put matters right, and to take practical steps to prevent its recurrence. Prayer may sometimes be the only action we can take; but it can never be a substitute for taking action.

7. Prayer as adventure
Prayer doesn't simply lead to action. It can be seen as a spiritual adventure in its own right. It is time given to God to see where he leads us, and that could be into
peaceful adoration or agonised self-questioning. We may find ourselves lapped in God's peace and security, or suddenly faced with unforeseen and surprising consequences of some aspect of our faith.

In some circles, people speak of their regular time of prayer as a 'quiet time'. This is fair enough as a description of the physical circumstances in which prayer is made; but if it indicates that prayer is simply a quiet retreat from the demands of daily life, it is an incomplete description. It is no bad thing from time to time to take a newspaper with us as we pray, or to watch the television news conscious of the presence of God with whom we can communicate. We focus prayer by this means on the crying needs of the world.

This sort of imaginative praying – in which we identify with the situation of others, as recommended by Charles Elliott in *Praying the Kingdom* – may be particularly appropriate for those occasions when we have plenty of time and space available for prayer. It can certainly offer adventures for the liveliest mind.

8. Prayer and silence

For all prayer's potential for adventure, it remains true that silence is at its heart. Nearly all who have written most perceptively on prayer agree on this:

‘For God alone my soul waits in silence’ (Psalm 62:1);

‘God is true rest’ (Mother Julian of Norwich);

‘Silence is the matrix of eternity’ (Mother Mary Clare).

Mother Mary Clare goes on to say:

When I say silence is so precious, so powerful, I am not referring merely to refraining from speech, but to a relaxed, creative silence which is a medium for spiritual affinity and unity . . . which shows a loss of self, a stillness of spirit in which the true self – which God made in his own image and likeness – may be released.

This silence is no piece of spiritual self-indulgence: it is a time of deep renewal and often the opportunity to recognise the activity of God and hear his call to new forms of service. As Mother Teresa of Calcutta puts it, ‘We need silence to be able to touch souls’.

Concluding thoughts

In a very real sense, then, prayer gives a wholeness to our experience. It brings the many and varied elements of our time-bound existence into a single, eternal perspective. Through prayer, we are better able to see ourselves, because we see with God's eyes. Our goal is to become what we pray. Beyond this we cannot define prayer. All we can do is suggest images, signs, ways in which we may glimpse it. In a real sense, prayer is the poetry of the Spirit, and so we shall end with a poetic rather than a prosaic description of prayer.

Here, then, are two poems about prayer, one written recently, the other from the seventeenth century. Read them through several times, trying to experience their meaning as poetry – in other words, try to *feel* their meaning, as well as to understand them.
Disclosure

Prayer is like watching for the Kingfisher. All you can do is Be where he is likely to appear, and Wait. Often, nothing much happens; There is space, silence and Expectancy. No visible sign, only the Knowledge that he’s been there And may come again. Seeing or not seeing cease to matter, you have been prepared. But sometimes when you’ve almost stopped Expecting it, a flash of brightness gives encouragement.

Anne Lewin

Prayer

Prayer the Church’s banquet, Angels’ age,
   God’s breath in man returning to his birth,
      The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
   The Christian plummet sounding heaven and earth;

Engine against the Almighty, sinners’ tower,
   Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
      The six-days world transposing in an hour,

A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;

Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
   Exalted Manna, gladness of the best,
      Heaven in ordinary, man well dressed,

The milky way, the bird of Paradise,

Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul’s blood,

The land of spices; something understood.

George Herbert

2. Work through the following exercise, on your personal patterns of prayer:

Be honest and tick as many answers as are relevant.

(a) Which of the following does your own current pattern of prayer include?

- verbal prayer using prayers of others
- verbal prayer in your own words
- Bible study
- reflection on the events of the day or other themes
- cycle of intercession
- silence

1 ie transforming
2 in everyday setting or dress
• meditation
• other (please specify)

(b) What place in your pattern of prayer is given to:
• thanksgiving
• adoration
• confession
• praying for other people, situations, etc.
• self-offering
• reflection
• praying about your own life, needs, circumstances, etc.

(c) How long have you been following your present pattern of prayer?
• What are its main advantages for you?
• What are its main disadvantages for you?

(d) How have your patterns of prayer changed over the years? For example, what were they like in:
• childhood
• adolescence
• early adulthood
• through your adult life

3. Read ‘Worship the Lord’.

Worship the Lord

What is worship?
The word ‘worship’ comes from the same Anglo-Saxon root as the word ‘worth’, and means to give someone their due, to acknowledge their worth. We sometimes use the word ‘worship’ to describe times when we meet with other Christians, and as a group, express our faith-relationship with God. But as Christians, our whole lives should be directed to giving God his due. Worship is therefore an attitude or approach to every aspect of our lives in which we try to live at all times for God.

Worshipping together
What we do in our church worship is to express together our response to God who has created and loves us. Meeting together is no optional extra in our
Christian lives. Our modern European culture is riddled with individualism, and this means that many of us find it easy to think of personal prayer as the ‘real’ expression of our discipleship – and our meeting together as something designed to support and nurture the individual Christian life. This is not the view of the New Testament, where it is clear that true discipleship is only possible in the context of a Christian community. (See, for example, Romans 12:1–8; 1 Corinthians 12:12–31; Colossians 3:12–17). Meeting and worshipping together are therefore vital and indispensable aspects of being a Christian. Even the Desert Fathers, who were hermits, met together on Sundays for communal worship! When we meet together for eucharistic worship, it is the whole community which is celebrating (despite the fact that the priest is sometimes called ‘the celebrant’). In any form of worship, the leader’s role is to enable the whole community to worship God, to facilitate participation by all. In Common Worship the priest is called the ‘president’ at the Eucharist – all the church together celebrates and one person presides to enable good participation by all.

Worship past and present

Just as the Bible contains many examples of prayers, so too it has examples of worship. In Isaiah 6:1–5 the prophet describes being in the very presence of God – the angels who attend on God worshipped in words that still form part of our services: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory’. Similarly, the picture of heaven given in the book of Revelation describes the response to God of the beings around his throne: ‘Day and night without ceasing they sing, “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come... You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created”’ (Revelation 4:8, 11).

Any act of corporate worship needs to offer something to the whole of our personality and being, as we in turn offer our whole selves to God. We use our minds in worship through the ministry of the word – the sermon or homily – and through the prayers, as we think about the words. Our feelings, too, are involved – indeed, the best worship in when our minds are stirred by our feelings, and our feelings enlightened by our mind. Our wills come into play, as we choose to worship God, to offer him ‘our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice’. Our senses are engaged: hearing and sight in obvious ways in our services; but also touch (when the peace is exchanged, for example) – and even taste and smell at communion services – and smell especially when incense is used. We can echo the psalmist:

‘Bless the Lord, my soul;
with all my being, I bless his holy name’.
(Psalm 103:1)

Because worship is so all-embracing, the way in which we experience faith tends to lead us to prefer one type of worship over another. And conversely, worship often plays a very important role in fashioning our understanding and experience of faith. We shall now look at examples of some of the different aspects of worship, from different times and different cultures, in order to understand more fully what worship is. As you will see, the categories overlap considerably – very few examples fall entirely into a single category.
1. Worship as an acknowledgement of God

As we have already seen, worship is our acknowledgement of the worth of God – creator, redeemer, sustainer. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury in the early 1940s, wrote:

Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by his holiness; the nourishment of mind with his truth; the purifying of the imagination by his beauty; the opening of the heart to his love; the surrender of will to his purpose – and all of this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable, and therefore the chief remedy of that self-centredness which is our original sin and the source of all actual sin.

Here are just a couple of examples of this type of worship.

(a) Book of Common Prayer

Glory be to God on high, and in earth peace, good will to all men. We praise thee, we bless thee, we worship thee, we glorify thee, we give thanks to thee for thy great glory, O Lord God, heavenly King, God the Father Almighty.

(b) T S Eliot

O Light Invisible, we praise Thee! Too bright for mortal vision. O Greater Light, we praise Thee for the less; The eastern light our spires touch at morning. The light that slants upon our western doors at evening. The twilight over stagnant pools at batflight. Moon light and star light, owl and moth light, Glow-worm glowlight on a grassblade. O Light Invisible, we worship Thee!

2. Worship as insight into who we are

In worship, as well as proclaiming God’s greatness, we also proclaim our own littleness, or neediness, or sinfulness – and thus the never-ending wonder of God’s ‘amazing grace’, that he desires relationship with us. Worshipping God makes us recognise more realistically our own true condition. As the French theologian, Teilhard de Chardin, wrote: ‘To adore God means ... to annihilate oneself in proportion as one becomes more deliberately conscious of oneself, and to give of one’s deepest to that whose depth has no end.’

(a) Psalm 40: 1–3 (Revised English Bible)

Patiently I waited for the Lord; he bent down to me and listened to my cry. He raised me out of the miry pit, out of the mud and clay; he set my feet on a rock and gave me firm footing. On my lips he put a new song, a song of praise to our God.

(b) Creator God (The Iona Community)

Creator God,
because you make all that draws forth our praise
and the forms in which to express it,
we praise you.
Because you make artists of us all,
awakening courage to look again at what is taken for granted,
grace to share these insights with others,
vision to reveal the future already in being,
we praise you.
Because you form your Word among us,
and in your great work embrace all human experience,
even death itself, inspiring our resurrection song,
we praise you.
yours is the glory.

3. Worship as our response to the world
It's not merely we human beings who worship God – the whole of creation responds to the Creator:

_Evelyn Underhill, English mystic_

Worship, in all its grades and kinds, is the response of the creature to the Eternal: nor need we limit this definition to the human sphere. There is a sense in which we may think of the whole life of the Universe, seen and unseen, conscious and unconscious, as an act of worship, glorifying its Origin, Sustainer and End.

In our own worship, we may sometimes be aware of the responses to God of the world in which we live. Our liturgies use symbols – light, fire, bread, wine – which represent God's great and extraordinary presence in the ordinary things of everyday life. Groups like the Iona Community, or the St Hilda Community, who are creating new liturgies, often incorporate symbols from the natural world to express aspects of our life today.

4. Worship as Protest
But there are also times when we need to express our anger, or confusion, or frustration with God. Some people find this hard – as if worship should always be about the ‘nice’ and ‘good’ aspects of our relationship with God. But the Bible itself has a strong tradition of lament and angry complaint against God – the psalmists, for example, believed God was in charge of the world and all complaints should be addressed to Him.

(a) From Psalm 88

>You have put me in the depths of the Pit,
in the regions dark and deep.
>Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
and you overwhelm us with all your waves . . .
>O Lord, why do you cast me off?
>Why do you hide your face from me?

(b) “Peace on Earth” Bono, Song-writer and lead singer of “U2”

>Heaven on Earth - We need it now
>I'm sick of all of this - Hanging around
Sick of Sorrow - Sick of Pain
Sick of hearing - Again and again
That there's gonna be - Peace on earth.

Jesus, this song you wrote - The words are sticking in my throat.
Peace on earth.
Hear it every Christmas time - But hope and history won't rhyme.
So what's it worth? This peace on earth.

*(written after the bombing of Omagh, N. Ireland, 1998)*

### 5. Worship as commitment to the future

In our worship we entrust ourselves to God not only for today, but also for the future. God is unchanging – beyond time. Perhaps we’re more hesitant nowadays to express our hopes of heaven in our worship – we may feel that serving God *today* is what matters, rather than a hope of eternal reward. But this hasn’t been the view of the Church down the ages, as many of our Prayer Book and Common Worship collects indicate.

*Common Worship*

Almighty everlasting God,
increase in us your gift of faith;
that, forsaking what lies behind
and reaching out to that which is before,
we may run the way of your commandments
and win the crown of everlasting joy.

There is also that aspect of worship which commits to God everything that may happen to us in this life,

*St Patrick’s Breastplate*

Christ be with me,
Christ within me,
Christ behind me,
Christ before me.
Christ beside me,
Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ in quiet,
Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

### 6. Worship as Christian nourishment

Finally, we can look at worship as an means of nourishment for both our Christian minds and Christian experience. Worship of God feeds us as, together, we consciously come into his presence and remind ourselves of what God has
(a) **Worship from prison, by Chun-Ming Kao**

I asked the Lord
for a bunch of fresh flowers
but instead he gave me an ugly cactus
with many thorns.
I asked the Lord
for some beautiful butterflies
but instead he gave me
many ugly and dreadful worms.
I was threatened,
I was disappointed,
I mourned.
But after many days,
suddenly,
I saw the cactus bloom
with many beautiful flowers,
and those worms became
beautiful butterflies
flying in the spring wind.
God’s way is the best way.

7. **Worship as a way of life.**

One must remember the warnings of the Prophets and of Jesus, not to neglect the self-offering of our whole lives in worship.

**Amos 5: 21-24**

I spurn with loathing your pilgrim-feasts;
I take no pleasure in your sacred ceremonies.
When you bring me your whole-offerings and your grain offerings
I shall not accept them,
nor pay heed to your share offerings of stall-fed beasts.
Spare me the sound of your songs!
I shall not listen to the strumming of your lutes.
Instead, let justice flow on like a river and righteousness like an never-failing torrent.

**Matthew 5, 23 – 24**

So if you are presenting your gift at the altar and suddenly remember that your brother has a grievance against you, leave your gift where it is before the altar. First go and make your peace with your brother; then come back and offer your gift.

4. **Attend to the main service at your own church more carefully than usual this Sunday. Answer the following questions about it:**

- How well did the service enable you to express your own understanding of what worship means?
- Did the service gather up the whole of the congregation’s
lives in worship? Or were the weekday lives of church members left behind?

- Which of the aspects of worship described in the passage above were present?

Group Work

The relationship between prayer and worship:
(In twos or threes)
Consider the idea that “Worship is therefore an attitude or approach to every aspect of our lives in which we try to live at all times for God.”
Which aspects of worship take place outside a church building?
Are these the same as our personal prayers?

What is prayer?
Divide into three groups and each group look at one of the following situations:

- an adult confirmation candidate, newly come to faith, asks you to help them to pray. You know they would like a basic framework to work with.
- a friend or family member who isn’t a Christian, asks you why you “waste” time praying.
- your Vicar asks you to lead intercessions at Church. How will this differ from the prayers you make at home and what similarities will there be?

In full group, report your conclusions.

Common Worship - the essentials.
The worship we share in church is composed of many parts. The liturgy of the Church of England (“Common Worship”) gives a framework of essentials for an authentically Anglican act of worship, rather than prescribing the exact words to be used. This framework for “A Service of the Word” is printed below.

A Service of the Word
There are four sections:
Preparation, includes Greeting,
Prayers of Penitence, either here or in the Prayers
Venite, Kyries, Gloria, a hymn or a song may be used
The Collect is said here, or in the prayers.

Liturgy of the Word includes Bible Readings
A Psalm or Spiritual Song
a Sermon
an Authorised Creed or Affirmation of Faith.

Prayers including Intercessions and Thanksgivings
The Lord’s Prayer

Conclusion a blessing, dismissal or other liturgical ending.

If Holy Communion is to be celebrated the Liturgy of the Sacrament includes
the exchange of the Peace
the preparation of the Table
the Eucharistic Prayer
the breaking of the Bread
The reception of Holy Communion

- What is the advantage of having a common framework for churches to follow? Are there any dangers in allowing each place to frame a service which suits its own needs?
- How can our corporate worship aid our personal prayer and our lives of dedicated, worshipful service to God?

Further Reading

There are many books on prayer – though they can easily get in the way of prayer itself! Best of all is the book of Psalms.

Charles Elliott, Praying the Kingdom, Darton, Longman & Todd.
Making free use of imagination, fantasy, story and myth, to link prayer for the coming of God’s kingdom in today’s world.

Bruce Duncan, Pray Your Way — Your Personality and God, DLT
An exploration of personality-type and how this affects a person’s prayer life, using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.

Monica Furlong, Contemplating Now, Hodder.
A helpful and accessible book on contemplative prayer, and how this can enable us to maintain our inner balance and our relationship with God, linking these to the busyness of life.

Grove Spirituality Booklets
Grove Books of Cambridge publishes a series of 24 page introductory booklets on spirituality, many of which cover various aspects of prayer. A list of those available can be obtained from Grove Books Ltd, Ridley Hall
Session 3

The Bible

Aims

- To discover more about where the Bible comes from, and what it contains;
- To look briefly at different approaches to the Bible.
- To explore the importance of the Bible in developing our Christian discipleship;
- To help group members to discover their own approach to understanding the message of the Bible

Preparing for the Session


The Bible, Book of the Acts of God

The Scriptures have always played a vital part in the faith of Christians. Clearly the New Testament writers thought they were important – they often refer to the Hebrew Bible (that is, the Old Testament Scriptures) to support arguments or justify conclusions. The writer of the ‘Pastoral Letters’ (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) had a particularly clear picture of the part played by the Scriptures in Christian growth (see 2 Timothy 3:14–17), and Jesus himself seems to have taken the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy very seriously (for example, Matthew 26:54).

How we use the Bible

In the Church of England, as in many other Churches, the Bible is a central feature of worship. We read it at every service, we often sing portions of it set to music (psalms, canticles and some hymns), it is often the basis for the sermon, and even the focus of the Communion service is described in words drawn straight from the New Testament (the section beginning, ‘Who, in the same night that he was betrayed. . . ’ in the prayer of thanksgiving). Surprisingly, therefore, the Bible is still a relatively unknown book to many Christians. This is perhaps especially true of the Old Testament, which we read rather less in church than the New – but there are many Christians who are hard
put to it to find their way around even the New Testament, once they get beyond the four gospels and Acts.
Perhaps the very way we use the Bible in church has something to do with this. Apart from some sections of the Old Testament (such as the book of Proverbs), the Bible was not intended to be read in short passages as if it were a collection of pithy sayings. We often lose a good deal of its sense if we read a passage without knowing its context. Indeed, reading the Bible in this way can sometimes be seriously misleading, as it prevents us from ever getting hold of what the writer is really trying to say. Some books (e.g. Job) simply can't be understood unless we read them right through. Unfortunately, we do just that in our church services!
So the Bible has suffered from the way we treat it. Even our respect for it can be misleading. The Song of Songs, for instance, is quite obviously an erotic poem, but for centuries it has been presented as an allegory of Christ's love for the Church because of Christian embarrassment that the holy book should contain such explicit references to sex! Even Christians who read the Bible regularly often have no-go areas in it, like the book of Revelation, or the Lamentations of Jeremiah.

Not just a book – more a library

Some of the difficulties we have with understanding the Bible arise from the fact that it looks to us like a single book. It has two covers and a spine, and we can tend to assume, therefore, that like most other books we read it is one `story'. In a sense that's true. But we also need to think of the Bible as a whole library of separate books, written over a period of some 1,000 or more years, and incorporating a lot of much older material too. Many changes took place within the period that the book was written and this is reflected in the way that material, preserved from the past, is presented.

The Old Testament

The Bible begins with what seem to be two collections of material:

- the first five books of the Bible – called the Pentateuch (which were probably put into their present form in the period after the Israelites came back from exile in Babylon, after 540 BC);
- the history of Israel, contained in the books from Joshua to 2 Kings (which probably dates from somewhat earlier).

Both these groups of books contain a lot of much earlier material, some of which is very old indeed, and which would have been passed down from one generation to another by word of mouth for many centuries before it was written down.
These two collections are followed by another history of Israel, in the books from 1 Chronicles to Esther (which was probably written down at the same period as the Pentateuch was compiled, and which took the story of Israel on to the period of return from exile). It covers some of the same ground as the previous history, but from a different point of view, reflecting the experience of exile in Babylon from 587 BC onwards. This had a deeply traumatic effect on Israel's religion because of the destruction of the Temple, till then the focus of the nation's faith. It
led to a crisis of confidence, out of which the Judaism of New Testament times was born.

Next comes a series of writings, most of which belong to a category called wisdom literature. They include Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes – and also the book of Psalms, which seems to be a collection of worship material composed during the Israelite monarchy from about 1000 to 500 BC. It was mostly for use in the Temple, though some seems to have been for private use.

Most of the rest of the Old Testament is made up of the records and writings of the prophets, who were active critics of Israelite life and values, from the eighth century onwards. It is unlikely that all of these were written down in their present form by the prophets whose name they bear. More likely the disciples of the prophets collected their sayings and issued them in suitably edited form. In at least one case (Isaiah) the present book appears to contain the work of several writers from very different periods.

The New Testament

The New Testament begins with the gospels – memoirs of Jesus written for early Christian communities, as much to shape their pattern of discipleship as to give information about the facts of his life. The book of Acts, which follows the gospels, is really volume 2 of Luke’s Gospel, and takes the story of Jesus as far as the arrival of Paul, the apostle to the Gentile world, in its capital, Rome.

But the gospels, written after about AD 50, are not the earliest writings of the New Testament. Much closer to the time of Jesus himself are some of the letters, especially those of Paul; and while some scholars doubt whether all the letters that bear Paul’s name are genuinely his, there is no doubt that most are.

The New Testament letters were written to specific churches with specific problems. They address particular issues, or reflect particular occasions (like 1 Peter, which many believe to be written for reading at a service of baptism). So while they give us glimpses of the beliefs and activities of the earliest Christian churches, they are by no means a blueprint for all subsequent ages. They have, nevertheless, rightly exercised an immense influence on the subsequent development of the Christian Church.

The final book of the Bible, Revelation, belongs to a category of literature called apocalyptic (which means ‘unveiling’); the book of Daniel is another example. Revelation is a Christian apocalypse, which sets out to interpret the world of the early Church, and its experience of persecution, in terms of a cosmic power-struggle between God and the Devil. It does so by using a ‘code’ of word-pictures which are highly dramatic and imaginative. It is not intended to predict the future, and those who try to make it do so misunderstand its real meaning.

Preparation (continued)

2. Which of the following statements seems best to sum up what you believe about the Bible and its place in your own Christian discipleship?

(a) The Bible is a difficult book from the past. It helps us know how to live, but in order to understand it today we need the Church to tell us what it means and how we should follow its teaching.

(b) God revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ. The Bible is important because it is the record of how that revelation took place, written by people who believed in it. If we read the Bible with the
same faith, we too will meet God in and through Jesus.

(c) The Bible is the word of God. What the writers wrote down was what God put into their minds, and therefore, in the form in which it was originally given, the Bible is the infallible truth spoken by God. What the Bible says, God says.

(d) The Bible is the story of how God's people in the past experienced and followed him. It helps us understand ourselves better than any other book. In it we find stories of faith which are an inspiration and example to our own discipleship. We don't need to believe everything it says, but we do each need to apply the stories in our own way.

(e) We can hear the gospel through the choices and actions of those in the Bible who encountered God through Jesus Christ. The 'doctrines' they believed, and those the Church claims to have deduced from the Bible, are irrelevant. What matters is that we experience a life-changing confrontation with God.

(f) The Bible is the story of the origins of the Jewish and Christian faiths. It is an interesting historical document which helps us understand our faith, but it is a product of its own time and place, and not very helpful in telling us how to follow God today.

(g) The Bible is where I encounter God. As I read the words of the Bible and the stories it tells, and reflect on the impact they make on me, I see how God wants me to be in my own setting.

If none of the statements expresses your own views about the Bible, try to write a statement of your own.

3. Look again at the statement you have chosen (or written). Can you say why you think this is the right way to view the Bible? Try to write a few sentences expressing your thoughts.

4. Read ‘Approaches to the Bible’.

Approaches to the Bible

Over the centuries – and especially during the last 200 years – there have been many different approaches to the Bible, often reflecting different churchmanship or denominational traditions, as well as the spirit of the age in which they were most popular.

(a) The Catholic tradition

Statement (a) of task 2 in your preparation work reflects traditional Roman Catholic thinking about the Bible – an approach which is also shared by some Anglicans. It puts the Bible firmly in the setting of the Church. Understanding the Bible is, therefore, not a matter of private judgement, but of interpretation by the Church which brings to bear upon it the accumulated experience of centuries known as ‘tradition’.

This approach is associated with a view of the Church in which there is a pyramidal power-structure descending from Christ, through the bishops to the people. The nearer you are to the apex of the pyramid the more you are seen as able to speak with the authority of the Church in
interpreting Scripture. The further away you are from the apex, the more your role is to listen and accept the statements of authority, rather than forming a judgement of your own. Such an approach reduces the likelihood of eccentric and individualistic interpretations of Scripture.

(b) Classic Protestantism

Statement (b) of the preparatory work reflects the approach taken by most Protestant Churches in the Lutheran tradition, and is also adopted by many Anglicans. It begins from the belief that, in the Bible, Christians experience God addressing them through Christ, and it tries to take this experience seriously without giving a complete account of how the encounter takes place. It thus recognises an area of mystery – the province of the Holy Spirit – in the understanding of Scripture.

This means, in turn, that it is an approach to understanding which is particularly open to people without much theological knowledge: ordinary folk can meet God in the Bible without needing to know how it happens. Unlike the Catholic approach, therefore, this one stresses the importance of private interpretation and judgement – which can have (practically speaking) both advantages and disadvantages.

(c) Verbal inerrancy

Statement (c) of the preparation work summarises the approach taken by Protestants who followed the theological signposts set up by John Calvin, the founder of the Reformed Churches. Today this is the approach of the more conservative evangelicals in the Church of England and other denominations, and is sometimes called ‘fundamentalism’. Interestingly, it is also the way in which ordinary folk on the edge of, or outside, the Church often assume that the Bible ought to be approached. It lies behind the tendency to treat the Bible superstitiously – e.g. never putting other books on top of it.

According to this view, we encounter God through the text of the Bible, which is ‘his word’, and therefore ‘infallible’ (that is, ‘incapable of leading anyone astray’) and ‘inerrant’ (without any mistakes ‘in all that it affirms’).

The result is to reverse the authority pyramid of the Catholic approach: here, the authority is found at the base of the pyramid – in the hands of anyone with a Bible. Not surprisingly, those who take this view often favour democratic forms of Church government. It is a view which lays great stress on the individual, because, in the end, each individual is responsible for discovering the infallible message of the inerrant Scriptures for themselves.

(d) Classic liberalism

The three approaches we have considered so far have one thing in
common: they all recognise and affirm a supernatural element in understanding the Bible. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the approach reflected in statement (d) of your preparatory work – the classic liberal view.

This owes something to the widespread nineteenth-century belief that scientific and technological progress were lifting humankind into a new era in which all problems could be solved without recourse to powers beyond this world. It attempts to do full justice to the fact that the Bible was written by human beings, and is a product of human communities. As a result, all sorts of new light can be shed on its meaning.

One effect of the liberal approach was to open the way for new kinds of Bible study, in which the human circumstances in which the books of the Bible were written, and the intentions of the writers, received much more attention than before. In this way a neglected aspect of the Bible was discovered, and much light shed on its meaning – though some of the theories were highly fanciful.

(e) Existentialism

Statement (e) of the preparation work represents a relatively modern school of thought about the Bible. It builds on some aspects of liberalism, in that it rejects the supernatural. But unlike liberalism, it does not try to ‘explain away’ the undoubted supernatural element in the Scriptures; instead, it accepts that this is part and parcel of the world-view of the biblical writers. But because it is not part of our world view, we must ‘demythologise’ the Scriptures – that is, we must discover what is being said about existence in any particular part of the Bible, in terms of the particular world-view of its writers. In doing so we find ourselves face to face with a Jesus for our time, who confronts us in our situation and compels response.

(f) Biblical agnosticism

Statement (f) of the preparatory work reflects the viewpoint of many people who have become tired and frustrated by the arguments between those who hold one of the other five points of view outlined above, and who cannot see much point in reading the Bible anyway! Sadly, this approach often results from ignorance of the Bible and what it says. There is no doubt that, as church-going has declined, and as RE in schools has become less and less Bible-orientated, so general familiarity with the contents of the Bible has dramatically decreased.

(g) Postmodernism

Statement (g) of the homework reflects a postmodernist approach to the Bible. ‘Postmodernism’ is a term used to describe a lot of what is going on in Western culture today. It affects the ways in which we all think, and the assumptions we make – even though we might not
realise it! Postmodernism looks at any piece of writing, including the Bible, on the basis that its meaning is not necessarily to do with what the author originally intended, but is wholly a matter of how the reader understands it. So the date and original circumstances which produced a work are irrelevant: what matters is how I understand it in relation to my situation.

By this token, the same Bible passage might therefore mean very different things to two different people. Truth is entirely dependent on the reader's perception of it.

Liberation theology is a good example of a postmodernist approach to the Bible and to the Christian life. People struggling to survive in Latin America, at the very limits of human possibility, experienced great liberation and spiritual rebirth when they stopped listening to what the Roman Catholic Church had been teaching them about the God of the Bible. Instead of accepting passively their miserable lot in life, they began to think about God's nature and will in relation to their oppression, their own desperation. In the story of the Exodus (for example), discovered that God did not want his people to suffer oppression. In Exodus 3:7-8, God told Moses: ‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their suffering, and I have come down to deliver them’. Liberation theology claims that what these verses mean is about God's activity here and now, in today's world, rather than about an episode in Israel's history.

Concluding comments

There is not much point in having any view of the Bible, however, if we never read it and know little about what is in it. Later on in the Foundations for Ministry course we shall be spending a good deal of time making sure you have the necessary information to make up your own mind about the Bible.

The views described above are by no means the only approaches to the Bible available today. But most views are made up of elements found in one or more of these. Each view, too, reflects certain presuppositions or assumptions about the nature of God, the world, and humankind, and their relationships – and these may often play the greatest part in the choice of a person's particular approach to the Bible.

Group Work

The contents of the Bible

1. Write the following headings on a wallchart:
   - History
   - Poetry
Without looking in your Bibles, remember the names of as many books of the Old and New Testaments as you can, and write them under the appropriate heading on the wallchart. There may be some books which you can’t agree on, and which you put under more than one heading. If so, get those who disagree to explain why they hold these views.

2. Now check in your Bibles whether you have remembered all the books. Your list should total 66 books (there are 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament).

Different approaches to the Bible

3. Look together at the six statements about the Bible from Task 2 of the homework – statements which correspond to the approaches to the Bible described in the reading ‘Approaches to the Bible’ Discuss the following questions about each approach:

- What positive insights about God, his ways, and how we experience him do you think this approach to the Bible emphasises?
- What do you think those who approach the Bible in this way are most anxious to avoid?
- What do you think those who approach the Bible in this way are most anxious to avoid?

4. Share together the results of Task 3. You may want to write down all the results, using a separate wallchart for each approach.

The aim of this exercise is to encourage group members to appreciate the positive values which each approach represents, and to understand that their own approach to Scripture is not the only one.

Group leader: if your group is relatively monochrome theologically, it may be difficult for other approaches to the Bible to receive proper representation. In this case, you should act as advocate for each of the other approaches, as necessary.

5. Make two lists on a wallchart:

(a) a list of things about the Bible which make it important and relevant for Christians today;
Session 4

The Story of the Old Testament

(b) a list of things about the Bible that make it difficult to understand or relate to our lives.

When you’ve finished, put the lists on display.

6   All group members should look at the wallcharts produced by the other small groups, and note any differences from their own.

**Ending the session**

7. Reflect on what part the Bible plays in your Christian discipleship – for example:

   - How often do you read it?
   - How important is it for you?
   - What, if any, are the problems you have with it?
   - How might these be overcome?
   - Has the work you’ve done in this session changed your views in any way?

As a group, pray together, either silently or aloud, that each member may come to value the Bible as part of their own walk of faith.

**Reading to follow up this Session**

‘Understanding the Bible’ (below) looks in more detail at different ways of understanding the Bible, and at some of the problems and difficulties we may experience as we read it. If you are interested in historical questions of how the books of the Bible were written, collected and chosen for inclusion, try John Barton’s book, *Making the Christian Bible* (Darton, Longman & Todd). Barton is a top biblical scholar, but here writes very clearly and simply for beginners.

Look also at the books recommended at the beginning of this unit, on page 4.

**Understanding the Bible**

**A different kind of book**

Whatever their disagreements in interpretation, all Christians agree that the Bible is both different from other books – yet is also similar to them. But there is also disagreement: what are the similarities and what are the differences? And which
is more important when it comes to understanding, or interpreting the Bible: the similarities or the differences?
The main difference between the Bible and other books – even most other religious books – is that the Bible has a special authority (virtually all Christians agree on this). This authority arises from the fact that it is the unique revelation of God's activity, and of his purposes for his people.
The focus of God's actions is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and it is through the Bible that we receive the story of these actions of God, and the first interpretation of their meanings.

- The Old Testament is the unique story of how God has revealed himself in the creation, in the history of the world, and in creating a community of people with a special calling to serve him and make him known.
- The New Testament is the unique story of how that community and its understanding of God was changed by the coming of Jesus Christ, and of what he means for the people of God.

A supernatural book?
Some Christians (but not all) believe that the Bible is therefore different in other ways. They believe that the Bible cannot be approached in just the way we might read any other book, because it is in some way 'special'. Through it we can hear God speaking with unique authority for our lives today.

We began to think about this in the preparatory work for this session, and in the session itself: the six brief statements about the Bible reflect six different ways in which Christians approach the task of understanding the message of the Bible.

Few matters have raised more controversy in the Church. In the Middle Ages people were burned at the stake just for trying to make the Bible available for people to read in their own language. Even today, to approach the Bible in an unfashionable way can, in academic circles, lead to the strongest disapproval. It is also still true that, in some circles, the validity of a person's Christian faith is judged by the way they approach Scripture.

It is not hard to understand why this is so. For all Christians the Bible is a vital link in the chain by which we know God. But as we have already seen (and as the session may have revealed in your own group), knowing God means different things to different people – and nowhere is this more obvious than in our use of the Bible.

Different ways of knowing God, through different ways of understanding the Bible, often seem to threaten each other. The result is that different approaches usually concentrate on the negative things to criticise in each other's position, focusing on those aspects of the opposing view with which they are most uncomfortable.

It is possible, however, to be more positive, and to try to understand what it is that those who differ from us are trying to safeguard by the things they say – as we attempted in this session. While approaches may differ, they may actually have more in common than at first appears. Indeed, you may have found, when you did your homework on the different statements about the Bible, that you felt that none of them really described your own feelings – but that some things in several of them expressed aspects of your own approach.

This is not surprising. Every person brings their own variations of approach. This should warn us of the danger of making our own approach to the Bible into a party badge or slogan. What matters is not our degree of loyalty to a particular
approach, but that we are able to experience God speaking to us through the Scriptures.

Looking at some difficulties
If we are honest, then, the Bible can be quite a difficult book to use, and one that presents us with many puzzles. Among the difficulties we can experience are the following.

1. Lack of relevance
We claim that the Bible is of central importance – but how far does it actually guide us in life? It's easy to be very selective about the passages we refer to, and for most people, there are huge chunks of the Bible which remain virtually unknown. Besides, we cannot always find the guidance we would like, because the Bible does not speak directly to our situation. (Where, for example, can we find direct help in solving problems like the ordination of women, chemical warfare, global warming, world poverty, etc?) Too often, the Bible appears to speak with a divided voice, or in terms no longer relevant to us.

2. The cultural barrier
The Bible’s contents span the period from 1000 BC to AD 200 – and so come not only from a very different cultural background from our own, but also from different cultural situations at the different times of writing. This affects many aspects of our use of the Bible.

(a) The Old Testament is written largely in Hebrew, the New Testament in Greek. There are no ‘original’ copies of the text, as it was first written down – the copies we do have are sometimes incomplete, conflicting, or plain incomprehensible.

(b) Translation is difficult, and its results vary, and can even be misleading. To create a pure and exact translation isn't possible - meanings change subtly depending on which English words are used, and how texts are punctuated. Which version of the Bible should we use?

(c) Before much of the Bible was written down it was handed on (sometimes for many generations) by word of mouth. This means that different versions of the same story were often blended together, or bits of different stories were linked up.

(d) The Bible's imagery and style can be confusing: parable and story-telling are less familiar means of communication to modern readers. We're more used to thinking of facts as the way to express truths, rather than stories.

(e) The world-view of the Bible writers is radically different from that of modern people. For example, they often thought that ill-fortune was God's punishment for particular sins, and believed sickness to be the result of the activity of demons. Though remnants of this way of seeing the world are still with us today, most people don't find explanations of this kind very convincing.
(f) Moral attitudes are different. Few of us feel comfortable with the bloodthirsty stories of the Old Testament, especially those where God himself commands the wholesale destruction of innocent people. The matrimonial deviance of some stories of the patriarchs is also difficult. What should we make of material like this?

3. The scientific challenge
From the beginning of the 1800s onwards, the advance of science has led to questions about the Bible. Modern science began in the sixteenth century – but at first the Bible survived alongside the new science; indeed, many leading seventeenth-century scientists, such as Isaac Newton, were devout Christians. In the nineteenth century, however, the theories of geologists about the age of the earth began to cast doubt on the biblical story of creation. Darwinism, in the late 1850s, put forward an alternative account of the development of life in naturalistic terms which seemed to leave no room for the activity of God. Indeed, even religious assumptions about the place of human beings in the natural order were challenged, and doubt was cast on the whole idea of a purposeful relationship between God and humankind. Did this invalidate the Bible’s contents?

4. The historical challenge
Nineteenth-century advances in the way history was studied, particularly on the Continent, also challenged the supernatural elements of the Bible story. A book which describes the activity of God in terms of divine intervention and miracle seemed increasingly remote from the way people actually experienced events, which were being understood in terms of observable cause and effect. In an age when miracles and supernatural happenings were widely regarded as the stuff of superstition and folk-tales, many people came to suspect that the Bible was out of touch with the world as they now understood it. How does the Bible’s accounts of the supernatural square with this ‘common-sense’, rationalist view?

5. The literary challenge
A third nineteenth-century development, linked with changes in both science and history, was the application to the Bible of ‘scientific’ methods of literary analysis. Careful study of biblical texts showed that, in many places, different accounts of the same story had been merged (not always very successfully). Sometimes these different accounts contradict each other; often they have different ‘interests’ or reflect different theological points of view.
This raises questions about what actually did happen, and also suggests that the Bible is not the unified account of God’s doings that it appears to be.

So how should we read the Bible?
Difficulties like these inevitably raise the question of why the Scriptures were written, and how they are to be read and interpreted. As David Day put it, ‘If the Bible is God’s revelation of himself and his purposes to humankind, then why has he given it to us in such an inefficient way? As a handbook on life and how to live it, it is surpassed in incoherence only by computer manuals.’ He goes on:

For whatever reason, God has given us his revelation in a form which is messy, often communicated through stories but also
through letters, complaints, laws, taunt songs and sermons — and always filtered through personalities who reflect and speak out of highly specific situations. . . This is the Bible as we have it. We might feel, modestly, that we could have done better than God but, in the event, he didn’t ask us to take on this particular project. We shouldn’t be surprised. The embodiment, or the incarnation, of truth in specific people and situations seems to be his preferred style of working.

( *A Preaching Workbook*, SPCK, 1998)

From this, he concludes that we should treat Bible passages with great seriousness. We should take time and trouble to understand what the texts are actually saying — who wrote them and why, as well as what they may mean for us today. If we leap straight to their meaning for us, without trying to understand the origins of a Bible passage, we are likely to end up with a ‘pretext’ — that is, an excuse for riding one of our own hobby-horses, and reading into a text whatever suits us — rather than a word from God.

The last 100 years or so have seen an enormous amount of work by theological scholars, who have tried to discover more about the kind of book the Bible is and how it was written, in order that Christian people will be able to go on hearing God’s message in it.

Their aim has been to find ways of linking the worlds of the text and the reader. This often involves helping readers to understand the large gulf between their world and the world of the original text, and to understand that a text has more than one meaning:

- the meaning that the original writer wished to convey to the original readers or hearers;
- the meaning for us, as readers today.

If, through good sermons, Bible reading notes or commentaries, we can enter the world of ‘then’, and begin to understand something of the primary meaning, and if we try to understand our own situation in the world of ‘now’, we will truly be open to hearing God’s word speaking to us about ourselves.
Session 4

The Story of the Old Testament

Aims

- To gain an overview of the variety of books in the Old Testament
- To begin to understand something of its historical and geographical setting
- To consider how stories from the past can help us understand more about God’s relationship with people today.

Preparing for the Session

The reminder of this unit will take you through the Old Testament. The first session of the next unit “Jesus and His story” will include study of the early Chapters of Genesis and develop links between the Old and New Testaments.


The Story of the Old Testament

We shall start by asking questions about the Old Testament which we might ask about a modern book:

- What’s it about?
- Who wrote it?
- When was it written?
- What’s in it?
- Why was it written?
- Why should we read it?
- How can we check whether it’s accurate?

What is the Old Testament about?

The Old Testament (sometimes known as ‘the Hebrew Bible’) is a collection of 39 books. (The Apocrypha, which contains up to 15 extra books, is part of the Roman Catholic, though not of the Protestant, Old Testament.) These books are
very varied in their styles and in their aims – but almost all of them share, in one way or another, two great underlying themes:

1) the story of God’s tender and constant love for the people he has specially chosen to be his own – Israel;

2) the story of God’s great ‘if’. From the very beginning, the story of Adam and Eve, God’s relationship with human beings was conditional on their loving obedience to him (if they ate the forbidden fruit, they would die – Genesis 2:16-17). God told Moses clearly: ‘Therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples’ (Exodus 19:5). But much of the Old Testament deals with the darker side of that wonderful promise – what happens if the people chose not to obey God, as God declares to Solomon: ‘If you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments ... then I will cut Israel off from the land that I have given them’ (1 Kings 9:6–7).

The books of history and law, of stories and wisdom, of prophets and poetry, of vision and of lament, are all different ways of looking at, experiencing and interpreting aspects of these two great themes.

Who wrote the Old Testament?

Most, if not all, of the Old Testament books are anonymously written – we simply don’t know who wrote them down. Even where books are called by a person’s name, this doesn’t necessarily imply anything about authorship (e.g. the book of Job is a book about Job, not by Job; the Psalms of David may not mean the psalms that David wrote, but the psalms dedicated to David – and the book of Isaiah is thought to have been written by three entirely different authors at three different periods of Israel’s history).

Another reason why it is difficult to name Old Testament writers is that very few of the books were written by one person at one time. For example Genesis is the first book in our Bibles – but it’s not the oldest book in the Bible. It may contain some of the oldest stories – Genesis is almost like a scrapbook in which someone has collected and written down stories which had been told by word of mouth for generations, or an anthology of all the ancient stories of Israel’s distant history, woven together to make a single book. The tell-tale evidence for this can be seen (for example) in that there are two versions of some stories – there are two creation stories in Genesis, for example. In the first one (Genesis 1:1–2:3), God creates the universe from chaos, and the final act of his creation is to form human beings. In the second one (Genesis 2:4–22), God starts with a barren earth, and first makes a human being, going on to create plants, birds and animals.

Such examples happen so often that scholars generally agree that Genesis – and many other Old Testament books – was formed from materials coming from many different periods and settings. There was no author in the way that we think of it today; instead there was a compiler who gathered together and combined material from different sources.
The Ancient Near East in Old Testament Times
When was the Old Testament written?
The date when different parts of the Old Testament were written down is often hard to establish – not least because, as mentioned above, some books obviously include very old material within them. The oldest passage in the Bible is usually thought to be the poem in Judges 5, called ‘the Song of Deborah’, probably written by an eye-witness and dating from about 1125 BC. Parts of the book of Daniel are the most recent material in the Old Testament, dating from about 160 BC.

But the contents of the Old Testament span a far longer period than just the 1000 or so years when it was written down. The first 11 chapters of Genesis deal with humanity’s primeval beginnings, while the stories of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph) which take up the rest of Genesis probably cover the period from about 1800–1600 BC. The Old Testament, then, tells a story which begins in the Stone Age and ends in the world of the first Christians.

What’s in the Old Testament?
At the end of this reading material is an optional section, which lists each Old Testament book, and offers a brief description of its contents. Here, though, we shall look more generally at the kinds of books contained in it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of material</th>
<th>Books of the Old Testament</th>
<th>Kinds of writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Pentateuch</td>
<td>Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy</td>
<td>Story and mythology; history and law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther</td>
<td>Story and history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poetry &amp; Wisdom</td>
<td>Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon</td>
<td>Drama, poetry, proverbs, ‘wisdom literature’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Prophets</td>
<td>Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi</td>
<td>Prophecy, history, poetry, propaganda</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why was the Old Testament written?
As we have seen, the Old Testament was written over a period of almost 1000 years – so it’s impossible to give one simply answer as to why it was written. Writing was practised in the Middle East from about 2500 BC – though for a long time, Israel’s stories and histories were passed on by word of mouth (oral) rather than written down.

There is one crucial period of Israel’s history which seems to have prompted people to make a more permanent record of the ancient stories, the nature of
Israel’s God and the worship of him, and of more recent history – and that was the Exile.

The Exile
By 586 BC God’s people were refugees in Babylon, taken from their centre of worship (the Temple in Jerusalem), from their Promised Land. The trauma of this event, and separation from all that was dear to them, prompted the Israelites to gather together the traditions that were precious to them. Some time after this, the first five books of the Old Testament – collections of ancient and traditional material – were written down in their present form, and soon became the centre of Jewish religious observance and identity. They were called ‘Torah’ (Hebrew for law, instruction, guidance – which are all contained in these books) – which we sometimes call ‘the Pentateuch’ (i.e. ‘five books’).

Also probably compiled at about this time from earlier material were the history books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings (sometimes known, along with the book of Deuteronomy, as ‘the Deuteronomistic history’, because there are indications that all these books may have been compiled by the same group of editors). These books tell the story of Israel in such a way that the destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile can be understood as God’s punishment of his people for their failure to live up to the standards God had set for his special relationship (covenant) with them. During the Exile, some prophetic books were also written – e.g. Ezekiel and the second part of Isaiah (chapters 40–55).

Before the Exile
Some of the prophets’ works date from before the Exile of 586 BC – we can tell this largely because of their content, which can often be related to historical events of the period. Before, during and after the Exile, the role of the prophets was generally to challenge people – including the rulers and priests – about their moral and spiritual unfaithfulness to God, threatening judgement, inviting repentance, and sometimes holding out the hope of new experiences of God’s faithfulness in the future. The books thought to have been written before the Exile are Amos, Hosea, Micah, the first part of Isaiah (chapters 1–39) and Jeremiah.

The return from Exile
About 100 years later, another collection of history books was compiled – 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. This was written for the Jews who had returned to Israel after the Exile, to challenge them to be perfect in their observance of the Law. Similarly, the prophetic books of this period are the third part of Isaiah (chapters 56–66), Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.

Why should we read it?
Is the Old Testament, with its ancient history and quaint laws and practices, of any real use to Christians today? Do we need to struggle with its unfamiliarity – the lists of names and strange places?

It is certainly true that, in places, the Old Testament presents today’s reader with difficult stories of bloodshed and child-sacrifice, polygamy and incest. It is also true that many of the difficulties and the strangeness are reduced when we look at the Old Testament stories in their proper historical setting. But the Old
Testament is not just a historical record of the development of Jewish faith and religious practice. It is also part of the Christian Bible. So how do the religious ideas of the Old Testament relate to the life and teachings of Jesus, and of the New Testament writers?

John Drane offers some suggestions:

It is a simple fact that we will not get far in making sense out of the New Testament if we are ignorant of the Old. Jesus and his disciples were practising Jews. They were thoroughly immersed in Old Testament ways of thinking about God and the world. For them the Old Testament faith was a living and vital part of their total existence. Of course, in many respects, they grew out of Judaism, as they found some things had to be discarded or developed in the light of the exciting newness of God’s actions in Christ. But for all that they continued to think of their new Christian experience very much in terms of the faith in which they had been brought up . . .

The Old Testament . . . also contains important statements of truths about God and his relationships with people and the world that are as valid now as they ever were.

(Introducing the Old Testament, Lion Publishing, p. 334)

Despite all the difficulties we may have with reading the Old Testament, it tells us about God’s loving care for creation from the beginning of time; that God is all-powerful, yet intimately concerned with the well-being of the most vulnerable people; that God’s demands are moral, rather than being about correct religious ritual; and that God wants a close and loving relationship with human beings. The stories of the many characters of the Old Testament are like the soap operas of our time, an narrative of the ways of human life. Even the notion of blood sacrifice – so common in the Old Testament world, and so alien to us today – is closely bound up with the Christian understanding of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection as the once-for-all sacrifice for our sins.

So we do need to get to grips with the Old Testament, both as history, and as part of the story of God’s ongoing relationship with us, his people – for without it, ‘the Christian faith itself would make imperfect sense’ (Drane).

How accurate is the Old Testament?

For many people in the last 150 years, the accuracy of the Old Testament accounts has been an important question. For many periods of the history and prehistory of the Jews, the Old Testament itself is our main or only source of information – it’s just not possible to check the facts and figures. We also need to be aware that emphasis on the literal accuracy of facts and figures is very much a modern characteristic – our need to know this type of information says as much about us as the early Israelites’ lack of interest in it says about them!

However, in the last 150 years, a number of archaeological discoveries have supplemented and supported the biblical record. Most such discoveries can’t be linked directly to a named Bible character – but can help us understand more about the society in which such people lived, as John Drane explains:

It is, for example, highly unlikely that any archaeologist will ever find a reference to the story of Abraham. But archaeology has shown that migrations like that of Abraham were taking place all over the Fertile Crescent during the second millennium BC, and that some of the customs mentioned in Genesis were practised at the time.

Occasionally, the findings of archaeologists can illuminate specific
passages in the Old Testament. In 1 Samuel 4, we have the story of how the Philistines captured the ark of the Covenant in a fierce battle near the town of Shiloh, where the ark was kept. Readers of the Bible had often surmised that Shiloh itself must have been destroyed at the same time, for when Israel recovered the ark it was not returned there. Now, excavation has shown that Shiloh was indeed destroyed at the time of this incident in the eleventh century BC.

(Introducing the Old Testament, p. 34)

At the end of the Group Work for Session 1, there is a section of optional reading material which lists all the books of the Old Testament, with a brief description of each. (It is taken from John Barton, Making the Christian Bible, Darton Longman & Todd). You may find it useful to look at it now as preparation for the group discussions.
Session 4

The Story of the Old Testament

Group Work

The variety in the Old Testament

1. Quickly read as many of the following passages from the Old Testament as you can. Using the suggested questions below, decide (if you can) what kind of writing each might be.

- Genesis 11
- Leviticus 23:1–22
- 1 Samuel 16
- Psalms 22 and 23
- Proverbs 10:1–17
- Song of Solomon 5:10–16
- Daniel 7:1–10
- Amos 7:1–9
- Jonah 1

Group leader: the passages should be divided up among the small groups so that all are covered.

To help you identify different kinds of writing, some possible questions are:

⇒ Is this a story?
⇒ Is this poetry?
⇒ Is it about the writer’s feelings?
⇒ Is it a prayer?
⇒ Does it seem to be about (or related to) real events, or does it seem to come from the imagination?
⇒ Is there more than one kind of writing in the passage? (if so, list both).
⇒ Why might it have been written (e.g. to inform people, to move them, to inspire them, etc)?

2. Share your lists of the different kinds of writing, and make a composite list.

- From reading ‘The Story of the Old Testament’ (above) – and from any other knowledge you may have of the Old Testament, do you think your list covers all the kinds of writing in it?
- If not, what further kinds of writing do you need to include?
3. Why do you think there are so many kinds of writing in the Old Testament?
   - How do you think it helps us in trying to understand a book or passage from the Old Testament, if we know what kind of writing it contains?
   - How do you think it helps us if we know when it was written, and under what circumstances?

The historical and geographical setting of the Old Testament

Group leader: if possible, bring to the session modern maps of Palestine and the Middle East, for comparison.

4. Look together at the maps of Palestine and of the Middle East in Old Testament times. Try to find the following countries or places which are all mentioned in the Old Testament:
   - Judah
   - Israel
   - Ammon
   - Damascus
   - Moab
   - Syria
   - Assyria
   - Babylon
   - Ur
   - Samaria
   - Egypt
   - Jerusale
   - Shiloh
   - Bethel
   - Edom
   - Nineve
   - Dan
   - Beersheba

6. Whereabouts would these places be on a modern map of the Middle East (if you have access to one)? And whereabouts would present-day Baghdad, Cairo, Beirut, Teheran and Kuwait be on the map of Bible times?

God’s love – then and now

7. Read at least one of the following passages, and consider how it sounds to you as a Christian today (regardless of when it was written, or why, or by whom!). Does it sound as though it was a different God who was worshipped?
   - 1 Kings 19:1–14, 18
   - Psalm 30
   - Ecclesiastes 3:1–8
   - Isaiah 43:1–2, 10–13
   - Ezekiel 37:1–14
   - Micah 6:6–8

What sort of writing did you like best?
8. Feed back your thoughts from Question 7.

Books to Follow up the Session

The first chapter of John Drane’s *Introducing the Old Testament* will add considerably to your work on this session.

Also of value, depending on your own background and interests, are:


An easily readable book about the ‘mechanics’ of where our Bible came from – who wrote it, how the books were collected, what makes the books ‘Scripture’.

Trevor Dennis, *Sarah Laughed: Women’s Voices in the Old Testament*, SPCK, 1994. (and many similar books by Trevor Dennis)

This fascinating and lively book makes some of the more neglected Old Testament characters and stories come alive. It’s interesting and imaginative, as well as having a sound academic basis.

Jonathan Magonet *A Rabbi reads the Bible SCM 2004*

This book opens up the Bible in a variety of unexpected ways so that all readers will find their perspective and understanding changed. Its gentle introduction to the fascination of biblical Hebrew will prove a stimulus to explore the Bible in its original language.

The Books of the Old Testament
1. The Pentateuch

**Genesis**
The history of humankind from the creation of the world (including stories of the Fall, Noah, and the Tower of Babel) to the deeds of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph – the ‘Patriarchs’.

**Exodus**
The story of the Israelites in Egypt, their escape (‘exodus’) under the leadership of Moses, the law-giving at Mount Sinai (including the Ten Commandments), and the setting up of the sacred tent to travel with the people on their way to the Promised Land.

**Leviticus**
Further detailed laws given at Sinai.

**Numbers**
Further laws; then the story of the departure of the Israelites from Sinai towards the borders of the Promised Land. The stories of Balak and Balaam the sorcerer.

**Deuteronomy**
Moses’ last words to the Israelites, giving them further laws to be kept in the Promised Land. The death of Moses.

2. History

**Joshua**
The stories of the conquest of some of Palestine under Moses’ successor, Joshua.

**Judges**
Further settlement in the Promised Land. Israel is ruled by a succession of ‘judges’ (a combination of king and military commander) – such as Deborah, Gideon and Samson.

**Ruth**
A story set in the time of the judges about Ruth, a Moabite woman who, out of loyalty to her Jewish mother-in-law Naomi, settles in Israel and eventually marries a wealthy Israelite farmer.

**1 Samuel**
The change from rule by judges to rule by kings, under the guidance of Samuel. Stories about Saul, Israel’s first king.
**Session 5**

**Family Histories**

**2 Samuel**
David succeeds Saul, who is killed in battle with the Philistines. Stories about David. The detailed story of Solomon succeeding David, with David's other children being involved in murder, rape and incest.

**1 Kings**
An account of Solomon's reign, and, on his death, the division of the kingdom into north and south (Israel and Judah) under two different kings. Stories of the earliest kings of the divided kingdoms; the work of the prophet Elijah.

**2 Kings**
The work of the prophet Elisha. Stories of the later kings of Israel and Judah; Josiah's reform of the state religion in Judah. The invasion of Judah first by the Assyrians, then by the Babylonians; the exile of the people of Judah to Babylon.

**1 Chronicles**
Another version of the story of the world down to David, much of it told through genealogical lists ('begats').

**2 Chronicles**
The stories from Solomon to the Exile, covering the same ground as 2 Kings, but with many differences of detail, and including the return to Judah of the Jewish people at the end of the Exile.

**Ezra**
The story of how the Persian king sent various exiled Jews, including a priest called Ezra, back to Judah to rebuild the Temple and re-establish the religion of Israel.

**Nehemiah**
An account (often in the first person) of the activities of Nehemiah, a Jew appointed as Persian governor of Judah at around the same time as Ezra.

**Esther**
A story about a Jew, Esther, taken into the Persian king's harem, who saved her fellow-Jews from a threatened pogrom.

**3. Poetry and Wisdom**

**Job**
The story of a righteous man who suffers severely, tries to understand his unjust suffering in poetic conversation with three friends, and finally has a life-changing encounter with God, after which he is restored to prosperity.

**Psalms**
A collection of 150 hymns, prayers, songs and laments, often attributed to David.
Proverbs
Wise sayings and short paragraphs of teaching about wisdom, and ethical and practical conduct, often attributed to Solomon.

Ecclesiastes
A book of sceptical reflections on the meaning of life (or lack of it), often attributed to Solomon.

The Song of Solomon
Sometimes called ‘The Song of Songs’. A collection of passionate love poems.

4. Prophets

Isaiah
Lengthy prophecies attributed to Isaiah of Jerusalem, who wrote the first part of Isaiah (and after whom the book is named), and who lived before the Exile, in the eighth century BC. The book of Isaiah was probably also written by at least two other people at two later periods. The second part (chapters 40–55) is the source of many Christian images, including the ‘suffering servant’; the third part (chapters 56–66) was written after the return from Exile.

Jeremiah
The longest of the prophetic books, whose core is the sayings of Jeremiah, who lived from the late seventh century BC to the time of the Exile in 586.

Lamentations
Five solemn laments over the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586 BC, traditionally attributed to Jeremiah.

Ezekiel
The prophecies of a younger contemporary of Jeremiah, including his vision of the dry bones which came back to life as a symbol of the rebirth of the nation after the Exile.

Daniel
Stories and apocalyptic visions, said to be written by a contemporary of Jeremiah, who was exiled but rose to favour in Babylon through his power to interpret dreams. However, it was probably written much later, when the Jews were being persecuted by the Greeks in the second century BC. The lions’ den, the burning fiery furnace, and the writing on the wall, are the best-known stories from Daniel.

Hosea
Prophecies from the eighth century BC – the century after Elijah and Elisha.
Joel
Penitential poems in a time of natural disaster, but also prophecies of a glorious future when God will ‘pour out [his] spirit on all flesh’.

Amos
Prophecies to the northern kingdom of Israel by a contemporary of Hosea. Almost entirely doom-laden.

Obadiah
A short prophecy about the punishment of Edom for helping in the overthrow of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

Jonah
Well-known story about a reluctant prophet swallowed by a fish in punishment for refusing to obey God – but set free to go and preach to Nineveh and bring about its repentance.

Micah
Prophecies of a contemporary of Isaiah of Jerusalem.

Nahum
Oracles about the divine destruction of Nineveh.

Habakkuk
Prophecies about the coming destruction of Jerusalem by a contemporary of Jeremiah.

Zephaniah
Condemnations of much in the life of the people of Judah before the Exile.

Haggai
The words of a prophet who encouraged the community that returned from Exile to rebuild the Temple.

Zechariah
Oracles (from a contemporary of Haggai) concerned with the restoration of the community after the return from Exile.

Malachi
Attacks on various abuses in the community after the return from Exile – along with a famous passage predicting the return of Elijah to inaugurate the ‘day of the Lord’.
Family Histories

Session 5

Family histories

Aims

- To explore some of the Genesis stories of the fathers and mothers of faith;
- To consider their faithful responses to God – as well as their all-too-human failures;
- To reflect on the meaning of being faithful – as well as being flawed – then and now.

Preparing for the Session

1. Spend a few moments thinking about men and women – past or present, famous or generally unknown – who are your personal ‘heroes’:
   - Who are they?
   - Why do you admire them?
   - What are their particular strengths?
   - Do you know of any weaknesses in their actions or characters? If so, how (if at all) does this affect your admiration?

   In this session, we’re looking at some of Israel’s national heroes, the founding fathers and mothers of the nation. It might be helpful to keep your answers to these questions in mind as you think about Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Joseph.

2. Read ‘National Heroes – Fact or Fiction?’

National Heroes – Fact or Fiction?

The Old Testament starts at the very beginning of creation, the starting-point of the whole human race. And the first 11 chapters of Genesis tell, through stories interwoven with ‘begats’, of how the world came to be as it is. We shall look at this part of the Old Testament more closely in the last session of this part of the course.

Then, in Genesis 12, a family saga begins, which continues up to the end of Genesis (chapter 50) – and beyond. This is the story of Israel’s ancestors, men and women of almost legendary stature from whom the whole nation descended.
These were the people chosen by God himself for a special relationship – not, in many cases, because of their goodness and piety, but despite their flaws, their dishonesty, their deviousness – and because God loved them, allowing them to make mistakes, yet rewarding them for their faith, and teaching them to grow in their understanding of him and of themselves.

At this time, Israel is not yet a nation. It is still a single family – the family of Abraham and Sarah, to whom God gave a son, Isaac, when both parents were well past childbearing age. The name 'Israel' (meaning either ‘the one who strives with God’, or ‘God strives’) was given by God to Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, when he finally got his relationship with God on to a proper footing (see Genesis 32:22-32). So these are stories of origins, which were, presumably, passed down among the Israelite tribes from very early in their history, to enable the people of Israel to know something about who they were.

**Nations need heroes**

Most communities have stories of this kind. We English people have stories which give us a sense of our national identity – like the coming of the Romans and Queen Boadicea, King Alfred and the cakes, King Canute failing to hold back the tide, King Harold being shot in the eye with an arrow at the Battle of Hastings, or Francis Drake playing bowls on Plymouth Hoe. These are all stories about real people, and most of them have some basis in fact – though we would probably not want to take all of them as true in every detail.

Other stories, equally important for our sense of national identity, belong even more in the realm of legend: like the tales of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, or Robin Hood and his Merrie Men. These too probably have some basis in historical fact, but they’ve become folk tales, and we’ve lost contact with any historical facts that may lie behind them.

The important thing about these stories (whether they belong to the first group or the second) is not whether they are historically and factually accurate in every detail. Instead, they are important because they tell us something we believe to be true about ourselves and our nation. They have been passed on from generation to generation because people believe that they illustrate things which are true about us – our bias towards the underdog, our rejection of tyranny, our willingness to go down fighting, our sense of fairness, and so on.

The stories of the patriarchs (the name given to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph because they were the founding fathers of the nation) are probably stories of this kind. Biblical scholars are divided about how 'factual' they are. At one time it was fashionable to dismiss virtually all of them as simple legend – but recent scholarship has indicated that they do reflect a genuine historical context. For example, archaeological research has shown that, from about 2000 BC onwards, there were extensive migrations of semi-nomadic people from the east into the area we know as Palestine – people whose names, lifestyle and customs are similar to those recorded in Genesis. Abraham, with his family and his flocks and herds, migrated from Ur (then at the head of the Gulf, in present-day Iraq) to Palestine some time between 1800 and 1700 BC, according to current thinking.

And the stories recorded in Genesis end around 1600 BC, when Jacob’s family moved down to join Joseph in Egypt.

As to the details of what happens in the stories, all we can do is take them as they stand. There is no external or separate account of the events they record, but that does not mean they did not take place. The important thing about the
stories, in any case, is what they tell us about Israel's sense of national and spiritual identity.

The morality of the patriarchs
Throughout the stories of the patriarchs, these 'heroes of the faith' behave from time to time in ways which we find morally repugnant or disgraceful – or simply baffling! For example, some of them have more than one wife apiece – as well as having unquestioned sexual rights over their wives' slave-girls. Abraham twice attempts to pass his wife off as his sister, giving her sexually to a powerful ruler apparently to ensure his own physical and economic safety. And Jacob seems to put God's plans into action through a series of devious plots and scams which seem to have more in common with a dodgy tradesman than with the lifestyle of the people of God!

There are three things we should bear in mind as we read such stories:

- They took place nearly 4000 years ago, when social structures and cultural practices were very different. In that situation, these people were some of the most moral and upright, living by the best standards of the time.
- We are clearly being shown these giants of the faith warts and all. They weren't perfect; they made a real mess of some of their choices and relationships. But God still chose them to play major parts in his plan for humankind. And that's nothing if not reassuring!
- Every society (including our own) is blind to some of the things which it condones but which other generations understand that God finds offensive. For example, slavery was accepted in the eighteenth century, (and championed by church leaders) and child labour in the nineteenth -by definition, we can't see what our own moral blind-spots are.

Preparation on Abraham and Sarah

3. Read this group of passages from the story of Abraham and answer the questions that follow. It will probably be helpful to make a note of your answers for feedback at the group session.

- Genesis 12:1-20
- Genesis 16: 1–10
- Genesis 17:1–22
- Genesis 18:1-15
- Genesis 21:1-20
- Genesis 22:1-18

Questions

What pictures of Abraham and Sarah as people of faith come out of these passages?
4. Read ‘Abraham and Sarah, Ancestors in Faith’.

**Abraham and Sarah, Ancestors in Faith**

If you only read selected stories about Abraham, you could picture him as a man of faith who obeyed God even when it meant leaving his home, even when it meant sacrificing his beloved son. But if you read the whole story (or select different parts of it), a very different picture emerges. Abraham can be seen as a man of great contradiction, wobbling between faith and disbelief, courage and cowardice, and meandering along in search of the fulfilment of God’s promise. But what truly motivates Abraham and Sarah, his wife and travelling companion? The story of Abraham and Sarah begins with the call of God (Genesis 12:1–2) – when they both still had their original names of Abram and Sarai. Abraham’s father, Terah, had already been called to set out from the town of Ur in southern Mesopotamia, to go to Canaan – so when the call came to Abraham, they were already halfway there! Why the call came to Abraham, rather than to anyone else, we are not told. But what we are told is that ‘Abram went, as the Lord had told him’ (Genesis 12:4).

We shall now look in more detail at the stories of Abraham and Sarah, and their special relationship with God.
Abraham’s Family Tree

Hagar = Abraham m. Sarah

Ishmael

Isaac m. Rebecca

Ešau

1. Zilpah  2. Bilhah = Jacob  m. 1. Leah  2. Rachel

Reuben*  Simeon*  Levi*  Judah*  Issachar*  Zebulun*  Dinah

Joseph

Bejamin*

Ephraim*  Manasseh*

* 11 of Jacob’s sons and the two sons of Joseph (each counting as a half-tribe) gave their names to the 12 Tribes (or family clans) of Israel.
God's call
The story of God’s call to Abram reveals three major Old Testament themes:

1. The initiative in the story lies with God; it is he, not Abraham, who sets things in motion. He is the mover in this story.

2. It is God who chooses Abraham, not Abraham who chooses God. And God’s choice is a free choice which is not even a consequence of the sort of person Abraham is. This theme (sometimes called ‘election’) occurs over and over again in the Old Testament. The Scriptures constantly remind Israel of the way in which God chose to set his love on them – not because they had any special or desirable quality, but simply because he chose to do so.

3. Then there is the theme of what Abraham is chosen for: ‘I shall make you into a great nation; I shall bless you and make your name so great that it will be used in blessings: those who bless you, I shall bless; those who curse you, I shall curse. All the peoples on earth will wish to be blessed as you are blessed.’ (Genesis 12:2–3)

The promise is, right from the start, not for Abraham and his descendents alone. Blessing is to spread around the world. Later, in Israel’s history, many of her people would try to work out how this calling could be obeyed.

Abraham's response
As we noted above, Abraham’s response to God’s call was straightforward and direct: he set out as commanded, taking his wife, his family, and all his servants and possessions with him. How Abraham felt about God and the call, what issues he may have weighed up before responding, are left to our imagination. It is only later in the story that we are told explicitly that ‘Abraham put his faith in the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness’ (Genesis 15:6). In a very real sense, the whole of Abraham’s story is an extended exploration of what it means to respond to the initiative of God’s electing grace. And through it there run two interconnected ideas about the way in which human beings respond to God – faith and obedience.

So the story of Abraham is a story of discipleship – of someone learning the way, sometimes with pain and doubt, sometimes through his own mistakes, sometimes with joy and gratitude. Sometimes the lessons are explicit and God spells them out in detail. Sometimes the story merely records an incident without comment – but we may be sure that it is nevertheless inviting us to reflect on what is going on in the growth of Abraham's relationship with God.

God’s covenant with Abraham and Sarah
Abraham's story started (as we have seen) with God making a demand and a promise (Genesis 12:1–2). He makes more promises to Abraham (Genesis 15:5, 18–20). But in Genesis 17, God's promise becomes a ‘covenant:’ a two way
agreement – and this was to become central to Israel's faith and life, even up to the present day.

In his covenant with Abraham, God made three promises:

- that Abraham's descendants would be very numerous (verses 2–5) – and that they would be born from Abraham and Sarah (verses 16–19);
- that God was establishing 'an everlasting covenant', which would remain valid for all Abraham's descendants (verse 7);
- that they would receive the land of Canaan as their permanent home (verse 8).

God also required action from Abraham:

- he was to walk in God's ways, and be ‘blameless’ (verse 1);
- he was to circumcise every male in the household (verses 10–11) – a sign of the covenant that was to be repeated in every succeeding generation.

The sign of circumcision was quite explicit – but the meaning of ‘blamelessness' was not. In God's Sinai covenant with Israel, through Moses, the meaning of blamelessness was spelled out in great and precise detail. But for the moment the only law attached to the covenant relationship was the practice of circumcision. So the story of Abraham portrays the covenant relationship primarily in terms of God's promise. At the heart of it was God's commitment to his people. Once again, God was the initiator. The covenant was the external form by which he bound himself to those he had called and chosen.

But we can go further. The promise God made was specific – that Abraham's descendants would be many, and would inherit the land. And this promise was made to a childless man with a wife past childbearing! Response to the covenant, therefore, required an act of faith on Abraham's part: he had to believe God's word in an apparently impossible situation. When Abraham implemented the covenant by circumcising himself and his household, he was, in effect, demonstrating the faith with which he received the covenant promise.

But it seems that God still needed to deal gently with Abraham's hesitant faith. God appeared to him again (Genesis 18:1–15), this time in human form, to repeat his promise of descendants when Sarah was nearby. Abraham had apparently not told her about her part in the covenant promises – for when she hears of it, eavesdropping on the conversation, she laughs bitterly and cynically (verse 12). God challenges her disbelief – and perhaps it is a token of her transformation that, when baby Isaac is miraculously born, her laughter is no longer bitter but full of joy (Genesis 21:6–7).

The centrality of God's covenant in the story of Abraham, the model of Israel's discipleship, implies its centrality in the story of Israel also. Readers of these stories, especially at the time of the Exile, would inevitably be reminded that the covenant was the hub around which the whole religious life of the nation revolved. It was both the assurance of God's grace and the expression of Israel's faith – even in circumstances which seemed to deny the one and make the other irrelevant.
**Ishmael and Isaac – Abraham’s children**

Ishmael, born to Abraham and Hagar, Sarah's slave-girl, represents a well-meaning but mistaken attempt on Abraham's part to help God fulfill his promise of providing descendants. Presumably Abraham grew tired of waiting for the fulfillment of God's promise, so he took advantage of the contemporary custom that a child born to a wife's slave-girl could count as the wife's child. He may well have been acting on the principle that 'God helps those who help themselves' (not a biblical insight) – or he may have been so baffled as to how God could do the apparently impossible, that he felt obliged to find an alternative solution of his own. As a result, Ishmael was born – causing all sorts of family problems and rivalries, almost from the moment of his conception. Isaac, by contrast, was the child of the promise, and, we may imagine, all the more precious because of it. (The stories of Ishmael and Hagar are told in Genesis 16:1–15; 17:20; 21:8–20.)

**Preparation on Isaac and Rebekah**

5. Read the following group of passages from the story of Isaac and Rebekah, and answer the questions that follow, making notes for use at the group session.

- Genesis 24:1-26, 50–67
- Genesis 25:21-34
- Genesis 27:1-23
- Genesis 28:10–17
- Genesis 29:1–30
- Genesis 32:3-12, 22-32; 33:1-11

**Questions**

⇒ Why do you think these stories might have been included in the Hebrew Scriptures?

⇒ In what way do the stories illustrate the meaning of true faith?

⇒ What part does God play in these stories? Have you learned anything new about him, or his relationship with humankind, from reading them?

6. Read 'Generation Games – Isaac, Rebekah and Jacob'.

**Generation Games – Isaac, Rebekah and Jacob**

Through Isaac – only son of Abraham and Sarah, born when both his parents were, humanly speaking, well past having children – God’s promise to Abraham was fulfilled. Isaac was the first of the many generations which would give
Abraham more descendants than there were grains of sand. Yet in many ways Isaac's wife Rebekah is more central to the story than her husband. It is she who is the centre of interest in Genesis 24, when Abraham's servant goes to find a wife for Isaac from Abraham's homeland. It is possible, too, that later generations of Israelites may have seen a reference to the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the oracle about the twins in Rebekah's womb (Genesis 25:23). And it was her undisguised favouritism for her younger twin, Jacob, which was the moving spirit behind Jacob's deception of the dying Isaac whereby he stole the inheritance of his older brother, Esau.

The story of Jacob is, even more than the stories of Abraham or Joseph, one of a deeply flawed human being. It is, in fact, a conversion story, and ideally it is best read from start to finish at a single sitting, rather than as a series of separate incidents. In it Jacob progresses by lying, trickery and resourcefulness; he's always on the run and always one jump ahead of his competitors. Jacob has an early encounter with God in his dream at Bethel (Genesis 28:10–17), when he is alone, fleeing in guilt from his cheated brother. Here, God reveals to him the closeness of heaven and earth – that God is not far distant, but nearby and full of loving care and promise, even at this low-point of Jacob's life.

Yet, despite being deeply moved at the time, Jacob doesn't let his meeting with God affect his behaviour. The list of the victims of his trickery grows – Isaac, Esau, Uncle Laban, Leah, the Mesopotamian cousins – all suffer the consequences of Jacob's ambition.

But all the stories of Jacob's trickery and deceptions lead inevitably up to the mysterious wrestling match on the banks of the Jabbok Brook, recorded in Genesis 32. This is the moment at which Jacob's past catches up with him. There is nowhere left to run to except back to where he started from, and there, he knows, an aggrieved brother is waiting for him. But this is the moment, too, where God, who has been, as it were, lurking in the background of the story, steps into centre stage, and Jacob's life is turned around in one night of desperate conflict. The God who was until now a kind of talisman to ward off bad luck suddenly becomes a deadly adversary who may also, it transpires, be the source of true blessing. The Jacob who meets with Esau next day is a changed man – as his new name, Israel, is surely meant to indicate.

The story-tellers and editors of Genesis clearly meant us to see Jacob for what he was – a con-man with a dubious line in street wisdom. But they also meant us to see him as God's person: a fragile but essential link in the chain of covenant continuity. The message is plain: God does not depend for the realisation of his purposes upon an especially holy or specially moral or specially religious person. He works with real people in real situations, and human sin, selfishness and weakness are no barriers to the accomplishment of his objectives. God's way is the way of grace, triumphing over human error and sin.

**Preparation on Joseph**

7. Read the following group of passages from the story of Joseph, and try to answer the questions that follow, making notes to bring to the group session.

- Genesis 37:1–36
- Genesis 39:1, 6–23
• Genesis 41:1–44
• Genesis 42:1–4; 43:1–2; 45:1–28

(If you have time, read the whole Joseph story, from Genesis chapter 42 to chapter 47 – or even to chapter 50.)

Questions

⇒ In what ways was Joseph a ‘hero’, and in what ways was he flawed?
⇒ What part does God play in each of these stories? Have you learned anything from them about the ways in which God relates to humankind?
⇒ What national characteristics of Israel do you think these stories illustrate?

8. Read ‘God Meant it For Good – the Story of Joseph’.

God Meant it For Good – the Story of Joseph

The story of Joseph is also best read from start to finish at one sitting. It is a wonderful and exciting read, with many of the ingredients of a ripping yarn: over-indulgent father causing family rivalries; spoiled brat transformed into national hero; foreign seductress foiled; faked death-scene believed by grieving father; guilty brothers tormented by their wrongdoing; final happy family reunion.

In the larger story of the nation of Israel, this story of Joseph explains how the people of Israel came to be in Egypt in the first place (from where, in 200 years or so, after a period of slavery, they were led by Moses in the Exodus). In order to do so it introduces us to the twelve sons of Jacob – and to yet another dysfunctional family in early Israelite history!

The story of Jacob and his family is important for the way in which the future people of Israel came to understand God’s nature, and his relationship with them. Joseph’s experience of slavery, his imprisonment and deliverance because of his personal integrity, and the constancy of God’s presence with him, are hints of the later Exodus story. At the end of the Joseph story, all twelve brothers and their families (not to mention Jacob/Israel himself) went down to Egypt, thus making it very clear that the whole people of Israel shared the experiences both of slavery and oppression, and of deliverance.

These aspects of Joseph’s story lay the foundation for the Israelites’ basic understanding about their relationship with God – that their identity as a nation depends entirely on the saving activity of Yahweh.
Perhaps even more importantly, there is no room for the possibility that any Israelite might trace their origins to any other source. There are only twelve tribes, and all of them were the subjects of God’s saving acts. Thus to be an Israelite means tracing your spiritual identity back to that climactic event.

In other words, the Joseph story illustrates the belief that it is impossible to be God’s people without first being the people whom God delivers. There is no other way into the covenant relationship. Again and again this is demonstrated in Israel’s religious literature – not only in the stories of the Exodus (see Session 7), but also in the Psalms and the writing of the prophets. Israel is not only a nation, but is also a rescued and redeemed covenant community that owes its very existence to the saving act of God. And this shapes its sense of identity: it owes God a debt of gratitude which can never be repaid.

**Family unity**

Another aspect of redemption evident in Joseph’s story is the happy ending. The family is united; there is forgiveness of past wrongs, injustice and insensitivity. This may seem a small and rather sentimental matter – until you think back over the family stories of Genesis. In the very first human family, one brother murdered the other (Cain and Abel); ever since then, Genesis has recorded a sorry saga of jealousy, rivalry, favouritism, cheating, attempted murder – and even incest. Joseph’s willingness to forgive, to see God’s overruling hand even in his brothers’ jealousy and plotting, has at last created a harmonious family before God.

**God’s providential care**

But this belief in a God of deliverance and redemption is not the only theological theme in the story of Joseph. In many ways one of the most significant statements of the whole saga is what Joseph says to his brothers after the death of Jacob (Genesis 50:20): “You meant to do me harm; but God meant to bring good out of it by preserving the lives of many people, as we see today.” It is a mark of the change in Joseph that the spoilt brat who bragged insensitively and

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**Additional Note on the Name ‘Israel’**

Jacob was given the new name ‘Israel’ by the mysterious stranger with whom he wrestled all night by the Jabbok Brook (Genesis 32:22–32). Jacob’s twelve sons became founders of the twelve clans, or tribes of Israel, so the name came to mean all the people descended from Jacob (the ‘children of Israel’) – who was himself the grandson of Abraham and Sarah. Later, Israel was the name of their country (formerly Canaan). After the reign of Solomon, the kingdom of Israel split into two smaller kingdoms – Israel (in the north, based on Samaria) and Judah (in the south, based on Jerusalem). At this time, the name ‘Israel’ was used in two ways: nationally it referred to the northern kingdom, but in a wider, religious sense it designated all the descendants of Jacob, including the people of the southern kingdom of Judah.
arrogantly about his dreams can now, after enduring much pain and hardship, forgive, and can see the hand of God in even the worst of his misfortunes. The God of the Genesis heroes not only saves his people – he also orders all their circumstances, as well as all their doings, for their good. Not that they are mere robots, acting in accordance with some divine computer program. The brothers meant to do Joseph harm: it was a deliberate and cruel plot which could have cost him his life. But behind the scenes, as the story shows, God was weaving a different, unseen purpose. It meant that Joseph had to suffer exile, slavery, false accusation, neglect, and imprisonment – as well as elevation to a position of unimaginable power in Egypt. But the meaning of these things came to light in due time.

The message to subsequent generations of Israel – and especially to the men and women in Babylonian exile after 586 BC – is obvious. God's actions must not be judged hastily. Who knows what future good may be concealed behind present sufferings? When Israel as a people, like Joseph the individual, were suffering the pains of exile and slavery in a strange land, carried off by forces beyond their control, Joseph's story had a new power to invite them to reflect on the mystery of providence, and to await with expectation the revelation of how God 'meant it for good'.

**God's universal rule**

But Joseph's story reveals yet more about God's providential care. This story openly asserts that Yahweh's authority is no less effective in Egypt than it is in Canaan. It is Yahweh who gives the interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams, and Yahweh who inspires the solution to the famine that Joseph proposes. The power and authority of Israel's God runs beyond Israel's boundaries. And this is not only true of geographical boundaries. This story shows that the Lord God is in control of the created world, and of human life, whether or not people recognise him. He is in control of Egypt's food supplies; he sends Pharaoh dreams which predict the weather systems which God directs. It is God who alone can interpret dreams and predict the future. And thus it is God who is actually in control of the destinies of Egypt even though Pharaoh and his people know nothing of him and do not worship him.

**Undeserved suffering**

Many modern English readers know the story of Joseph best not from Genesis 37–50, but from Andrew Lloyd-Webber's musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. There is a song in the musical which captures quite profoundly a less obvious, but still visible element in the story of Joseph. It is a theme which was to become increasingly central to Israelite and later Jewish spirituality, and played a major part in the Christian interpretation of the Messiah. Alone in his prison cell, deserted by his family, falsely condemned by his employer, forgotten by those who had promised to remember him, Joseph sings:

> Close every door to me,
> Hide all the world from me;
> Darken my daytime and shut out the light.
> If my life were important, I would ask will I live or die?
> But I know the answers lie far from this world.

The language and sentiments reflect the twentieth-century context in which they were written. Yet both words and music capture something of the sense that
undeserved suffering is something which God regards as being of special value – a recurrent theme in the experience of Israel. Joseph is a victim for a good bit of this story. He suffers unjustly, and often at the hands of those he trusts. Yet out of his often innocent suffering comes safety and deliverance for his family (and for the whole land of Egypt). Without it they would have perished in the famine. In a sense, his pain becomes the means which makes their deliverance possible. We are at the roots here of a line of theological reflection that will lead eventually to Isaiah’s suffering servant, and, in the end, to the cross of Jesus Christ.

**Group Work**

The Group members should be divided into the three sub-groups which particularly studied each patriarch. Each sub-group should then study the questions relating to “their” patriarch for one third of the group session time, and prepare a presentation to the rest of the group. The presentations should cover the themes of the questions and should take the second third of the session. During the final third there should be opportunity for discussion and debate so that other group members, who will have done the preparatory reading can challenge, or add to the sub-group’s presentation.

**Abraham and Sarah**

2. Discuss the following questions, referring back, if need be, to the passages you studied:

⇒ What pictures of Abraham and Sarah as people of faith come out of these passages?

⇒ Can you see any particular characters or situations which might have seemed particularly relevant to the people in exile in Babylon?

⇒ What do you suppose the relevance of Genesis 17 might have been in the exilic situation?

⇒ Do you think that Genesis 21:9-21 might have anything to say to the issue of racism in the Church today?

⇒ Look together at Genesis 22:1-18. Is the sort of obedience Abraham shows in this passage a valid model for Christian faith and discipleship – or should we ask more questions?

⇒ Compare Abraham’s attitude in Genesis 22 with his behaviour in Genesis 18:16-33. He was willing to plead with God on one occasion – but not the other. Can you see any reason for this? Are there times when your prayers – or what you feel you can talk to God about – change?
Isaac, Rebekah and Jacob

4. The stories in Genesis 25 and 27 are not very flattering to Jacob, and paint a rather sad picture of family life and relationships in Isaac and Rebekah’s household. This does not fit in very well with the idea of Jacob as a model of faith. Yet Jacob the Trickster seems to be the hero, and the stories do not seem to make value-judgements on his behaviour:

⇒ Why do you think the stories might have been told in the first place, and then handed down?
⇒ What might their message have been for people of faith in Israel?

5. Part of the answer to the last question may be found in the strange and rather compelling story of the wrestling match at the Jabbok Brook.

⇒ Where do you think this incident fits in so far as the story of Jacob is concerned?
⇒ Why do you think the story has been included in the Old Testament?
⇒ Can you detect any changes in Jacob’s behaviour pattern as a result of this incident?
⇒ John Wesley thought that this story was about prayer – do you agree? If so, what does it tell us about prayer?

Joseph

6. Joseph’s behaviour in Egypt – unlike his earlier life – is exemplary. Hearing this story might have helped later Israelites cope with life in difficult circumstances, including that of exile in Babylon?

⇒ What guidance might the story of Joseph have offered to people in exile?
⇒ Can you think of any reasons why Joseph might have ‘tested’ his brothers’ behaviour and standards in chapters 42–44?
⇒ List what you think are the most important elements of Joseph’s story, in terms of what we can learn about God and about our relationships with others.

To End the Session

The session should end with prayerful reflection on the picture of God and his relationship with the human family which has emerged from this study.
Session 5

Group leader: it is important that all the preparatory reading for next week should be done by all the participants, but it will be helpful to divide responsibility for reporting back. So establish two groups and ask each to prepare to present their thoughts on the Exodus, or the Covenant.

Reading to Follow Up the Session


An introduction to the way the stories of the Old Testament work as vehicles of theological understanding.

David M Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, OUP.

A more serious and academic read – excellent for anyone who wants to take this subject further.
A New Beginning

Session 6

Aims

- To think about the Exodus from Egypt, and the covenant of Mount Sinai, as decisive acts of God in his relationship with his people;
- To discover more about the different men and women God used to bring about his people’s deliverance;
- To reflect on the significance of these stories for our own experience as God’s people.

Preparation on the Exodus

1. Read the following passages, all of which are part of the story of God’s deliverance, including the Exodus from Egypt and God’s continuing care of his people in their desert wanderings:
   - Exodus 1:6–3:12
   - Exodus 5:1–6:1
   - Exodus 14:5–31
   - Exodus 15:22–16:31
2. Reflect on the stories you have just read by answering the following questions:
   - List the people God used in these stories to bring deliverance to Israel in one way or another.
   - Can you find any recurring themes in the stories?
   - What are the main characteristics of God as he is portrayed in these stories?

1. Read ‘Midwives, Mothers and Moses’,

Midwives, Mothers and Moses

This session brings us to the very heart of the faith of Israel. Over and over again, the events which we are now studying are the focus of Israel's faith. The nation looked back to the Exodus as the definitive act of Yahweh's covenant grace. It was the one event in their early history around which Israel built its
whole sense of identity and destiny. It is crucially important for every aspect of
the nation's subsequent experience.

We left the Genesis story at the end of Session 3 aware of God’s double promise
to Abraham:

- that his descendants would be numerous (we learn in Exodus 1:7 that
  this has already been fulfilled);
- that they would have a land of their own - the land of Canaan.

The story of the Exodus – the events before, during and after it – is the story of
God fulfilling the second part of his covenant promise to Abraham.

Five women and a baby

The story of God’s deliverance begins humbly – not with visions and
thunderclaps but with five women – each very determined, and each (in her own
way) very brave. Probably none of them realised that they were playing a vital
part in God’s deliverance of all of his people.

The story also begins with a situation with which we, in the aftermath of the
Holocaust, are chillingly familiar: a tyrannical ruler who feels threatened by the
Jewish race, and who becomes both oppressive and murderous as a result.

Pharaoh’s claim to feel threatened by the Israelites (verses 9–10) rings hollow –
these people were slaves in a rich and powerful land. Pharaoh’s fear stems from
a dictator’s paranoia – but it finds a ready outlet in violence and oppression of
the Israelites (verses 13–16).

The midwives

The ‘heroines of the resistance’ (as biblical scholar Trevor Dennis calls them)
were the two midwives. Exodus 1:6–17 paints a bleak picture of fear, exploitation
and violence. Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives, bring courage, defiance – and
even humour – into the darkness. Summoned by Pharaoh to account for their
disobedience in killing all the Hebrew boys, they use an excuse which plays on
his racial prejudice. The original text of verse 19 makes clear that they are saying
something along the lines of: ‘These Hebrew women aren’t like your refined
Egyptian ladies, who are delicate and have trouble in childbirth. No, they’re more
like animals: their labour is so quick, so trouble-free, so like that of the wild
beasts, that we just can’t get to them in time!’

Moses, rescuer and leader of Israel, would have been killed at birth were it not
for the courage of the midwives. Trevor Dennis writes:

We can compare [these midwives] to Moses. Like him, they act as
saviours of their own people, and, as he will do eventually, they
fearlessly confront the pharaoh and all he stands for. As Israelites,
they emerge as heroines who might encourage future generations
of their people to stand fast in the face of oppression, and remain
loyal to their calling. Their story can be told among those who are
themselves the victims of systematic cruelty and carefully
 calculated violence, and bring them some rare and precious
 laughter.

(Sarah Laughed, p. 95)

The mothers

So the midwives outwitted Pharaoh – but not for long. Exodus 1:22 tells of a new
edict – that all the Hebrew baby boys were to be drowned in the Nile. Moses’
Messages and Demands

Session 7

birth, instead of being a cause for joy and celebration, is a cause for fear. Out of love for him, his mother hides her son in a watertight basket, and his sister guards him. The story is one which many people know from Sunday-School days. The Egyptian princess discovers the baby – and after what must have been a nerve-wracking time for Moses’ sister (for who would expect the daughter of Pharaoh to do anything other than put her father’s policies and laws into action?), the princess adopts the baby and unwittingly pays his own mother to nurse him. This isn’t just a sentimental tale – it’s another story of real risk. The princess chose to defy her father. Not only did she save baby Moses from drowning, but she took him to live as her son in the palace – and kept him there for years under the tyrant’s very nose! God’s plans of deliverance can use the most unlikely people – even those who have no idea of the role they’re playing. That seems to be the lesson of the first two chapters of Exodus – for without these very different women, differently motivated, yet all brave and defiant in the cause of right, Moses, Israel’s great leader and the friend of God, would not have lived to tell the tale.

Moses, man of God

As Israel looked back to the event of the Exodus, so they looked back to the person of Moses. His story is central to the whole of the rest of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). He was the great leader, the great law-giver, the man who knew God face to face, the once-and-future prophet, the one who, over and over again, was the intermediary and intercessor between the recalcitrant nation and God. The often uncomfortable three-way relationship between Yahweh, Moses and the people of Israel illustrates what was to be the repeated experience of the nation, with its themes of the divine word of law and leadership, the rebellious community, and the prophet as the uneasy interface between them. In many ways, the story of Moses is quite unlike those of the patriarchs. The patriarchs and matriarchs were the nation (in embryonic form – but the nation nevertheless). Moses was not. His place in the story is not to model Israel’s identity. It is to be the voice of God to Israel. And in a sense that is all he is. Despite his centrality, the remainder of the Pentateuch is not the story of Moses. It is the story of how God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt and led them to their inheritance in Canaan. Moses is a tool, not an independent agent. The point is reinforced by the story of Moses’ death in Deuteronomy 34. After all his astonishing labours, his abundant faith, his extraordinary and unique relationship with God, he was allowed only to see the land of Canaan from the distance. A single moment of anger, in which the meekest man in all the earth presumed to speak for God without authority, denied him the ultimate reward. The tool had a single flaw. Yet 600 years after Moses’ death, the memory of him was as strong as ever, and the writer of Deuteronomy could produce this obituary:

Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

(Deuteronomy 34:10ñ12)
Moses and Yahweh

The story of Moses, as it is told in the early chapters of Exodus, fits in with what we know of ancient Egyptian history (see ‘The Exodus and History’ at the end of this section). His name is Egyptian, and he was obviously sufficiently familiar with Egyptian life and culture to be able to come and go in the palace of Pharaoh more or less at will. On the other hand, the religious teachings which he brought to Israel do not reflect Egyptian worship. Moses’ God was not just a manifestation of the world of nature (like the Egyptian sun-god, Aten) but one who controlled nature, and who could be known in a personal way. The origin of this faith lay outside Egypt, in the Sinai Peninsula, where Moses went after fleeing from life in Egyptian society. There, God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, and called him to the task of liberation and leadership (see Exodus 3–4). It was there that God revealed himself by his personal name, ‘I AM’ (YHWH – probably pronounced Yahweh).

The Meaning of ‘Yahweh’

In ancient times, a person’s name was thought to express the essence of their identity. The meaning of ‘Yahweh’ is not entirely clear – though we do know that it is related to the Hebrew verb ‘to be’; it seems to mean something like ‘I am who I am’. This has been interpreted in several ways:

- ‘I create, I cause [things] to be’
- ‘I am the one who exists (is) eternally’
- ‘I will be’ – i.e. ‘I will be with you; I will be your God.

The divine name signifies God, who is the pre-eminent source of all being, faithfully present with his people as deliverer, guide and judge, and who is accessible in worship – yet who remains separate, and in control. As the First Commandment states, God’s name cannot be taken in vain – that is, used for human purposes.

Additional Note on the Name ‘Yahweh’

In the Old Testament period, the Hebrew language was written without vowels, and God’s personal name (as declared to Moses in Exodus 3:14 was written ‘YHWH’. It is thought (though not known for certain) that this was pronounced ‘Yahweh’. Note the shortened form of the name in the exclamation, ‘Halleluyah’ – ‘Praise Yah’ – also, the form ‘Jah’ used by Rastafarians, which also crops up in reggae music. The word ‘Jehovah’ is an incorrect version of YHWH which goes back to about AD 1270 (in some languages, ‘y’ and ‘j’ are pronounced the same). Because the Jewish people believed that God’s name was too sacred for general use, many translations of the Bible, both ancient and modern, use the description ‘the LORD’ rather than the more accurate Yahweh (an exception being the Jerusalem Bible).

Moses’ struggle with Pharaoh

So Moses (much against his own inclinations) brought the Israelites news of the God of their fathers, now made known by his name. The news was not of a distant God, but of one who was fully aware of their pain and oppression, and who was going to liberate them:
'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.' (Exodus 3:7–8)

Moses announced what God would do – nothing less than delivering his people from the ‘house of bondage’ so that they could return to the land of promise. The story tells of the ensuing conflict between God and Pharaoh, who was understandably reluctant to lose his nation of slaves. During the conflict, God visited a series of dreadful plagues on the land of Egypt, culminating in the death of every firstborn child in the land. How long all this took is unclear – but it may be right to think in terms of months or years rather than days or weeks.

In the end, however, the slaves escaped – first from the visit of the angel of death, by marking the lintels of their houses with the blood of sacrificial lambs, and then from Egypt itself, secretly, at dead of night. Pursued by the Egyptians they find themselves caught between Pharaoh's chariots and the waters of the Reed Sea, but at the last moment a way through the waves opens before them and they escape, only to see the horses of Egypt perish beneath the returning waters.

A story of such epic proportions was certainly told and retold for centuries, long before it was written down. Its basic outline can be found at the heart of the very oldest parts of the Old Testament, and there is no need to doubt that it reflects a series of events of equally epic proportions.

The story may well have been embellished as it was handed down, but most scholars are in no doubt that, under Yahweh's leadership, Israel witnessed a mighty deliverance – as Professor John Bright puts it:

The Bible's own witness is itself so impressive as to leave no doubt that some remarkable deliverance took place. Israel remembered her Exodus for all time to come as the constitutive event that had called her into being as a people . . . A belief so ancient and entrenched will admit of no explanation save that Israel actually escaped from Egypt to the accompaniment of events so stupendous that they were impressed for ever on her memory.

(A History of Israel, SCM, 1960, pp. 111–12)

Preparation on the Covenant

4. Read the following passages, which are about the covenant, and the events connected with it:

- Exodus 19:1–23:33
- Exodus 32:1–34
The first passage is known as 'The Book of the Covenant', since it is generally thought to be the 'book' which Moses is described as reading to the people in Exodus 24:7. The laws it contains, especially the Ten Commandments, are believed to be some of the oldest material in the Old Testament.

5. Reflect on the passages you have just read by answering the following questions:

⇒ What overall impression do these laws in the Book of the Covenant make on you?
⇒ What principles of justice seem to be enshrined in them?
⇒ What picture emerges of the religious beliefs and practices of the Israelites at this time?
⇒ What seems particularly alien or different about the law to you as a twenty-first century Christian?

6. Read the following passages:

- Exodus 17:1–7
- Numbers 11:4–20, 31–34
- Numbers 12:1–8
- Numbers 21:4–9

Reflect on them by answering the following questions:

⇒ What do these passages reveal about God’s relationship with his people, and theirs with God?
⇒ What do the passages reveal about God’s relationship with Moses?

7. Read ‘The Sinai Covenant — and Afterwards’,

**The Sinai Covenant — and Afterwards . . .**

The Israelites had escaped from slavery, delivered by the hand of their God and his servant Moses. The stage was set for the second, and more obviously religious, act in the drama. Moses led Israel away into the desert, and back to the place where he had his original encounter with God at Mount Sinai. There, God declared his covenant once more — this time not just with Moses, but with the nation as a whole.

Moses was the go-between in this process, going up into the mountain to speak with God and receive his instructions, and then coming back to communicate them to the people. As the story tells it, this was a lengthy process, and much of the rest of the Pentateuch is taken up in describing it, especially giving a detailed account of the laws which God imposed as the people’s covenant obligations.

These laws covered a very wide range of subjects. At their heart is the basic moral code of the Ten Commandments, but they include all manner of
regulations for the conduct of Israel's common life, and extensive codes of ritual legislation for use in worship. There are also detailed instructions for the construction of the ‘ark of the covenant, which was the visible symbol of God's invisible presence with Israel, and the ‘tabernacle’ (a kind of travelling sanctuary) to house it.

Undoubtedly some of this material dates from the time of the Exodus, but almost certainly much of it is rather later. Many of the laws relate to a settled, agriculture-based economy, rather than a nomadic existence, and much of the description of ritual assumes a context of regular temple worship. Such material, which may have come from various dates in the history of Israel, was probably included in the legal codes of the Pentateuch when it was organised in its present form.

Nevertheless, some of the material is very old indeed. As the escaped slave-nation pledged themselves to serve and worship Yahweh they used forms of covenant bonding which show marked similarities to binding legal treaties that were widely in use in the Middle East between 1200 and 1400 BC.

What is distinctive about Israel's covenant is not so much its form, or the ideas that it embodies, as the parties between whom it was made. At Sinai Yahweh bound himself again to be Israel's God. The freed slaves were reminded of God's liberating intervention on their behalf – and they promised, in return, to keep his commands and be loyal to him alone. In so doing they undertook to live by a series of essentially moral guidelines. Summarised in the Ten Commandments, these guidelines indicated from the beginning that God took more delight in justice, truth, integrity and mercy than he did in the observance of ritual and the performance of sacrifice.

**Covenant relationships**

We have already seen that, like any other agreement between two parties, God's covenant was conditional: **IF** his people kept their side of the covenant, God's love and faithfulness knew no bounds. **But if not . . .**

God's loving care for his enslaved people had been active long before they themselves were aware of it. Yet the story of 40 years of nomadic life in the Sinai Peninsula, before the Israelites came to the Promised Land, is a story of discontent and rebellion on their part, and of anger, or loving mercy, on God's, as the covenant people began to learn in practice what this special relationship meant. The dramatic events of Mount Sinai had enormous implications for their everyday lives – and all too often, they simply preferred an easy life to a godly one.

But Moses' faith and determination never wavered. His close relationship with God gave him a continued certainty of the Promised Land, even though he himself did not live to lead his people over the borders:

> Like Abraham before him, Moses was convinced that the direction of his own life, and the future of the escaped slaves and their descendants, was not at the mercy of impersonal social and political forces. It was in the control of a loving and all-powerful God: ‘People of Israel, no god is like your God . . . There is no one like you, a nation saved by the Lord. The Lord himself is your shield and your sword, to defend you and give you victory’ (Deuteronomy 33:26, 29).

*(John Drane, *Introducing the Old Testament)*
When was the Exodus?

It is puzzling, when the Exodus is so central to the faith of Israel, that the records of Egypt say nothing about it. If Pharaoh’s army really did pursue the people into the Reed Sea, and perish entirely, then the records of the Egyptian kings make no mention of it. This makes it difficult to say when it happened. Many scholars believe that the story of Joseph took place in the time of the Hyksos empire in Egypt. The Hyksos kings were not native Egyptians, but Semitic chieftains who took control of Egypt in around 1700 BC. They had similar tribal origins to those of Israel, and this may be the reason why Joseph was able to gain such influence with them. Their empire lasted until about 1550 BC when a rebellion drove them out. They were replaced by a new dynasty of Egyptian rulers, one of whose descendants, Rameses II, set about rebuilding the ancient capital of the Hyksos kings, as well as the city of Pithom, near Goshen, in about 1270 BC. A stone pillar from this period, found in Palestine, describes how Egyptian slaves ‘haul stones for the great fortress of the city of Rameses’. The evidence is not conclusive, but it is certainly possible that the Pharaoh of Exodus was Rameses II and that Israel left Egypt during his reign in about 1280 BC. Other archaeological evidence suggests that some Israelites had settled in Canaan by about 1220 BC, and there are a number of discoveries of Canaanite cities destroyed by fire in the same period – which might well reflect the stories of the conquest of the land in the book of Joshua.

Group Work

For the first part of the Group Work, you will continue to work in two groups on the subject you have prepared for homework – i.e. either the Exodus or the Covenant. Your aim is to work on a presentation of the subject, which can use the questions below as a springboard. Each group will then give their presentation to the other group.

Group 1  The Exodus
1. Share the results of your homework, focusing particularly on the question: What is the God of Israel like, from the evidence of the story of the Exodus?

2. In subsequent generations, Israel looked back on the Exodus as the moment at which its national and religious identity and faith in Yahweh really began. From the evidence of the story you have been reading and discussing, how would you answer the following questions?

   => Why do you think Yahweh chose Israel to be rescued?

   => What do you think the main characteristics of Israel's subsequent religious life and worship ought to have been:
      (a) at national level?
      (b) in family and private life?

   => What do you think might have been the main themes that Israelite theologians would have been concerned with?

   => Why do you suppose the Israelites were so prone to complaining and rebellion against Moses and Yahweh? (Use the Bible references given in Question 6 of the Preparation if you need examples of this.)

3. Prepare a presentation on the Exodus for the other group, emphasising what you see as being important in terms of the story and what lies behind it.

Group leader: have ready pens and a flip-chart (in case they are wanted), and ideas to offer support and help to both groups as they prepare their presentation.

4. Share the results of your homework, focusing particularly on the question: What were the main obligations and commitments on both sides in the Sinai covenant?

5. In a sense the whole nation of Israel was saved from slavery because of Moses faith:

   => Was this communal acceptance of one person's religious experience a good thing for the people?

   => Do you think the meeting with Yahweh at Sinai was meant to be the equivalent, for the whole nation, of Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush? If so, how did the results of the two encounters compare with each other?

6. In the Book of the Covenant, a series of Yahweh's laws are set
Many of these are based on principles of fairness or natural justice. But was Yahweh fair to the Egyptians?

7. The Ten Commandments are generally regarded as being, in some sense, true for all time yet they occur in a setting which contains many other laws that we think of quite differently, as only relevant to the people of Israel:

⇒ On what grounds can we make this kind of distinction?
⇒ Do we really try to observe the Ten Commandments anyway (look especially at numbers 2, 3, 4, 7, 10)?

8. Prepare a presentation on the covenant for the other group, emphasising what you see as being important in terms of the story and what lies behind it.

9. After the presentations there should be an opportunity for questions and discussion about what, if anything, this part of the Bible has to teach us about what it means to be God’s people today?

Reading to Follow Up the Session


A fascinating study (though not a light read) on the balance which Old Testament and Christian communities must maintain between being critical and being energising. The first chapter, ‘The Alternative Community of Moses’, is particularly relevant to this session.


This has a very lively chapter on the women of Exodus, including the midwives.
Session 7

Messages and Demands

Aims

- To understand how the way the nation was governed affected the people’s relationship with God.
- To understand how monarchy was introduced into Israel’s life
- To understand more about the variety of prophets and their message in Old Testament times;

Preparing for the Session

1. Read the following passages:

The History of Israel

Some people love it, some hate it – history. The history recounted in the Old Testament is important because:

- We are told that God has acted in real historical events; He has become involved in our lives, so finding out about the history is one way of finding out what God is like.
- The Scriptures continually told the Jews to remember what God had done for them – history was a prompt for praise, and
- What happened to the Jewish nation shaped the kind of people they became and how they worshipped God – as it has since Biblical times.

An approximate time-line. The older the events, the less confident one may be about the exact dates, but the following chart gives an idea of when each of the judges, kings and prophets lived and worked.

Note that the judges were the rulers of the developing nation, with God. The judges brought God’s word to the people. Once the monarchy was established there was a need for prophets
who would remind the nation, and especially the kings, of their duties before God.
The prophets did not live and write in the order in which their books appear in the Old Testament.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates BC</th>
<th>Judges/Kings/Events</th>
<th>Prophets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1300-1050</td>
<td>Gradual conquest of Canaan Samson, Deborah, Gideon and others</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1050-1000</td>
<td>King Saul</td>
<td>Samuel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000-950</td>
<td>King David King Solomon</td>
<td>Nathan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>870-840</td>
<td>King Ahab and his descendants</td>
<td>Elijah Elisha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>750-700</td>
<td>Fall of Israel (northern kingdom): Judah (southern kingdom) survives – just</td>
<td>Joel Amos &amp; Hosea (north) Isaiah chs. 1-39, Micah (south)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>630-605</td>
<td>Rise of Babylon</td>
<td>Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>605-570</td>
<td>Fall of Jerusalem (586) Exile and defeat</td>
<td>Jeremiah Ezekiel, Obadiah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>540-500</td>
<td>Fall of Babylon (539) Return, and restoration of Jerusalem</td>
<td>Isaiah chs 40-66, Haggai, Zechariah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500-400</td>
<td>Judah as province of Persian Empire</td>
<td>Malachi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400-333</td>
<td>Rise of Greece under Alexander the Great</td>
<td>Zechariah (latter part)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Judges and Kings: For 300 hundred years after settling in the land, the Israelite community in Canaan was ruled by Judges – charismatic individuals, appointed by God. The Book of Judges tells the stories of twelve of them, perhaps reflecting the presence of the twelve tribes of Israel. They probably did not have influence in the whole community at the same time. The Book of Judges may well be imposing order on what was a fairly chaotic collection of individuals and tribal groupings.

The role of the judges was to remind the people of God’s demands, to lead them in battle and settle internal disputes. Some, like Samson, appear far from perfect, and none left a lasting legacy: after their deaths the people reverted to former ways. The sequence of events can seem a little repetitive: when there was a judge, the people were reminded to obey God. And so God helped the people in their battles against their enemies. But, when there was no judge, the people...
forgot God. And God allowed their enemies to be strong. So, the people asked God to help. And then, God appointed another judge. (see Judges 2:16-19).

The Spirit of God dwelled in these individuals, a gift given when it was needed. The true ruler of Israel was God.

Read about Deborah (Judges chapters 4-5) Deborah’s role was to listen to disputes and give judgement. She responds to the cry of God’s people, though we are not told how she is aware of it, nor why she decides to act at this time, when Sisera had been oppressing the Israelites for 20 years. She gives instructions to the commander of the Israelite army and is able to predict Sisera’s fate. It’s a very bloodthirsty tale, which ends “The land was at peace for forty years”!

Read about Gideon (Judges chapters 6-8) This is a complex story of calling and faithfulness to God, combined with an indication of divisions within the Israelite community and the temptations of power. Gideon’s authority is tested and challenged by those around him as much as by his own doubts.

After he is proved successful, the people want to make Gideon king. Already the Israelites doubted that the present system of government gave them the kind of security they craved.

Read about Samson (Judges chapters 13-16). The story of the birth of Samson resembles the stories of Samuel and of John the Baptist. The despair of two parents is turned to blessing for many people. Samson is judge for 20 years, but the stories that survive of him show him to have been unwise in the use of the great gifts that God gave him.

Judges 17: 6 says: In those days there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in his own eyes, repeated in chap. 21, vs, 25. This system of government was failing! There was some peace and security when a judge ruled well, but if the judge was inadequate or the people took advantage of the absence of a judge, there was anarchy. Chapters 18 and 19 begin In those days, when Israel had no king and recount horrific outrages, which suggest that all moral values have been lost. Yet, as Gideon had said, when offered the throne the Lord will rule over you (Judges 8 23). The people were not satisfied and wanted to be like other nations, who had grand monarchs. Samuel is both the last of the judges of Israel and the first of the prophets. He appointed his sons to be judges, but they were not fit for office. God was persuaded to allow a monarch to be appointed over his people (1 Samuel Chap. 8). The system of being ruled by judges collapsed because of the weakness of some individual judges and the unfaithfulness of God’s people.

Kings and Prophets:

Samuel had warned the people that choosing to be ruled by a monarch, who would have much more power than a judge (and no parliament such as our own
to provide a check!), could result in considerable exploitation of their lives and possessions. The kings were often tempted to forget that they only ruled on God’s behalf and were subject to his rules. God sent prophets to challenge them and confront them with the challenges of keeping God’s covenant. They were not, for example to raise taxes to fight wars for their own glory. They were not to usurp the power of the priests, by acting as priests themselves. And they were not to worship any other gods, even if this seemed to promise greater power and security.

2. What do you see as the advantages and the disadvantages, for the Israelites of being ruled by judges and by kings? You may wish to create a table, with several entries in each section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Judges</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No taxes</td>
<td>Future certainty</td>
<td>Forbidden by God</td>
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</table>

- Do these issues have any relevance for the way our church or our country is governed?

**What is a prophet?**

3. Look at the following passages, making brief notes on what each of them tells us about who prophets were, and the ways in which they lived and worked.

- 1 Samuel 9:6-10
- 1 Samuel 10:1
- 1 Samuel 10:10-13
- 2 Samuel 7:1-3,17
- 2 Samuel 12:1-7
- 1 Kings 11:29-32
- 1 Kings 18:17-19
- 2 Kings 22:14-20

The activities and role of a prophet varied greatly from one person to another. Prophets could be visionaries, miracle-workers, advisors, consultants, predictors – or people who went into ecstatic trances. Just one of the prophets mentioned in the Old Testament is a woman (Huldah in 2 Kings 22:14) – we don’t know how common or unusual this was. Prophets were sometimes loners, sometimes wandered round in bands or groups. Prophets were not only found among the Israelites. They seem to have flourished throughout the Middle East – though, in general, pagan prophets were paid to keep the king happy. They were courtiers with a specific role – to make
sure the gods backed up whatever the king wanted to do. Yahweh’s prophets, by contrast, knew that everyone – and especially the king – must obey God’s laws and keep to the covenant agreement.

God’s Message — Variations on a Theme

On one level, God’s message through his prophets was unchanging: it was always a reminder to people of the covenant of God’s eternal ‘IF’. The message of the prophets from God was often in the form of the negative side of the ‘IF’: ‘If you don’t keep my laws, change, repent, behave rightly towards me and each other, then the consequences will be dire …’

Yet on another level each prophet had a particular message for his own time, place and situation. God’s purpose in speaking through a prophet was not to tell people about a timetable of future events (though prophets did sometimes make predictions because they were convinced that Yahweh was shaping the course of events leading from the present to the future). Instead the prophets were primarily concerned to communicate God’s message for now, and to summon the people to respond today.

We shall look briefly at four ways in which the prophets brought God’s messages to the people, to try to understand more clearly the kinds of things God was saying through the prophets.

1. Miracles
2. Oracles
3. Visions
4. Actions

1. Miracles

Miracles play a part in the stories of the early prophets Elijah and Elisha. They tell of Yahweh-worship in the face of aggressive pagan opposition – personified, in Elijah’s time, in the unpleasant and powerful person of Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab. God demonstrated his power and sovereignty before all the people through Elijah’s miracles, many of which were concerned with God’s power over creation, as shown in the fertility of the land, or the holding back or sending of rain.

The most public and dramatic of Elijah’s miracles occurred as a great contest of strength between Yahweh and the prophets of Ba’al (told in 1 Kings 18:17-40), on Mount Carmel. God’s decisive victory there also heralded the end of a terrible drought (verses 41-45). Elijah’s power as a man of God was also reflected in more private (though no less dramatic) miracles – such as his restoring to life the only son of the widow who had looked after him (1 Kings 17:17-24).

Elisha, Elijah’s successor, was a very different kind of prophet. His miracles were gentler and more domestic – finding a lost axe-head in the river, making bitter water sweet, and various healings, notably the curing of Naaman, the Syrian general, from leprosy when he visited the prophet at the suggestion of an Israelite slave-girl. Elisha’s miracles were those of a prophet concerned for people’s needs, of whom the king could say ‘The word of the Lord is with him’ (2 Kings 3:12).
2. Oracles

The prophets often communicated through ‘oracles’ – verbal messages from God, often in the form of poetry. You will have seen, when you looked up the Biblical references under *What is a Prophet?* that prophets were often expected to challenge and reprimand kings. They also spoke to the whole nation, since a religious message was also a political and social one. To love God meant not only to love your neighbour, but also the most vulnerable and weak members of society – widows and orphans, immigrants and foreigners. A powerful reminder of this is found in Micah 6:6-8:

> With what shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high?
> Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?
> Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
> Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
> He has told you, O mortal, what is good: and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

*Messages about the Messiah*

It is unlikely that the passages in the prophetic writings which Christians today connect with Jesus were consciously written as such in the first place. Most likely what the prophets had in mind would have been some local person or situation – or, in some cases the situation of Israel itself, which is spoken about as though the nation were a person. But whatever the original writers intended, the fact that these oracles speak to Christians today, in cultures and situations so different from those of ancient Israel, reminds us of the mystery that our experience of the Bible is of texts in which God reveals himself to us, and that their meaning finds its fullest expression in and through Jesus Christ.

Most obviously this applies to the passages in Isaiah about the Suffering Servant, which may well have referred originally to Israel’s plight in exile, but which now speak eloquently of Jesus’ revolutionary type of Messiah-ship. You could look, for example, at Isaiah 42, a passage which Jesus actually claimed as referring to himself (see Luke 4:16-21), or, of course, at Isaiah 53, the most famous of the ‘Servant Songs’.

There are many other passages of this sort (eg Ezekiel 37:21-28, Jeremiah 31:31-34, Joel 2:28-32) which you could look up and read if you have the time.

3. Visions

God spoke to some of the prophets through powerful visions. Isaiah’s vision of the heavenly temple was the setting for his call to be a prophet. Ezekiel was another prophet who had visions. His call, too, came through one — a most extraordinary vision involving bizarre creatures ‘full of eyes’, and some kind of a machine that sounds a bit like a helicopter, but which is probably a description of the chariot-throne of Yahweh (Ezekiel 1:15-21). The climax of Ezekiel’s vision was an encounter, not with Yahweh himself, for God is unimaginable, but with ‘the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord’.
The best-known vision in Ezekiel, however, was that of the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14), which God made first into human bodies and then into living beings, as a sign of what he could do with the apparently dead and scattered people of Israel.

4. Actions
There were several prophets who lived out God’s message to the people through their own lives, sometimes at great personal cost (we shall look further at this aspect of prophecy in Session 6). This ‘action-prophecy’ sometimes involved only a one-off parable, but it could also involve long-term and painful commitment. Hosea, for example, was required by God to love and marry a prostitute, which gave him first-hand insights into unfaithfulness within the covenant context of marriage. This enabled him to speak with passion about Israel’s unfaithfulness to God, and the pain of broken covenants.
Actions can often speak louder than words, as in the case of Jeremiah who, at God’s command, illustrated the perils of covenant-breaking by smashing an earthenware pot at the end of an impassioned sermon about Israel’s faithlessness, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts: So I will break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter’s vessel, so that it can never be mended’ (Jeremiah 19:11).

Group Work

The History of Israel
1. As the nation of Israel formed, it wrestled with the challenge of keeping up with its neighbours and with obeying God’s law at the same time. Many people find the Old Testament most relevant as they read about this struggle to live faithfully in the midst of a world that does not worship the same God.

⇒ What kind of leadership in your local church do you think would most accurately reflect the truth that God is our king?

⇒ How might the struggle to stay wealthy or to remain a military power lead our country away from God’s values?

The varieties of prophets
2. Draw up a ‘job-specification’ for an Old Testament prophet. Indicate:
   • what the work is all about
   • what its objectives are
• what the successful candidate’s role in the religious community will be
• the sort of qualities you will be looking for
• the sort of reception, working conditions, rewards and response the prophet can look forward to.

Group Leader: supply large paper or a wallchart on which the groups can write up their specifications.

Prophets today

3. Ephesians 4: 11 appears to suggest that we need prophets as one of the ministries that build up the church and equip God’s people for service.

⇒ If this is so, what is their role?
⇒ How would you recognise someone who was called to be a prophet? If there was an authorised lay ministry track for training prophets what might be included on the curriculum?

Reading to Follow up the Session


Describes various prophets of the Exile and how vital their message was to the community, linking it to the Church’s role today. A heavy but worthwhile read.


A good historical background with time charts, maps, etc.


This is a solid read, but full of fascinating insights into the Old Testament prophets, the ministry of Jesus, and our witness in the Church today.
Aims

- To learn the historical and religious background of the Exile of the Jews to Babylon;
- To explore what exile and deportation meant for the people;
- To consider how the Exile may have influenced the people who edited the Old Testament into the form we have it today;

Preparation for the Session

Divided we fall: Solomon’s idolatry, and rivalry between the twelve tribes eventually split the Kingdom into two. The country was divided by Solomon’s sons and one ruled Israel in the north and one ruled Judah in the south. Israel was destroyed by Assyrians in 722BC and the people scattered: the Samaritans were Israelites who stayed in the area and intermarried with other ethnic groups. Judah continued to be ruled by descendants of David. Although God had been reluctant to establish a monarchy, He had made a covenant with King David, and promised everlasting blessing for his descendents and the Holy City of Jerusalem. This covenant did not appear to contain the conditional clauses attached to other covenants (see 2 Samuel 7: 8-17).

A nation in exile: In 586/7 BC Judah was defeated and taken into exile in Babylon. This was devastating for the Jews (as they were now called). They thought God had promised security for ever. The Book of Lamentations is an expression of sorrow – and anger - against God. It expresses confusion that the promise that God had made has been broken. Have the people been unfaithful, or was God not strong enough to keep His promise?

In exile they collected together their traditions, laws and stories and considered what they needed to be restored, to their country and to God’s favour. The recognition of need for a messiah, a saviour, began to form. Far from the Temple in Jerusalem, synagogues were established at this time. They were places of study of the Scriptures as well as places of worship.

1. From read 2 Kings 25:1–21.
read Lamentations 1: 9 – 16. Part of this is written as if Jerusalem herself were crying out.

2. Read ‘The Exile as History’.

The Exile as History

The dramatic and tragic story of the two-year siege of Jerusalem, followed by the attempted escape of King Zedekiah, his brutal murder, the surrender of the people, and the destruction of the city is starkly told in 2 Kings 25. Solomon’s glorious Temple was stripped of its sacred treasures – and the people of Judah were marched off across the desert into exile in faraway Babylon.

In terms of the power politics of the time, Judah was a tiny nation caught between the giants of dominant Babylon and declining Egypt (see the map in Session 1). And it was not the first time that disaster had struck the city; nor was it the first time that the people of Jerusalem had been driven off into exile. Ten years before, as the year 597 had drawn to a close, Nebuchadnezzar had descended on the kingdom of Judah. In the conflict of nations little Judah was of small account. But its territory lay across the route through the fertile crescent from Mesopotamia to the Nile – and to Nebuchadnezzar, intent on defeating Egypt, it looked like an Egyptian outpost. So in 597 Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem and installed a puppet king, Zedekiah – deporting only the most powerful citizens, and leaving the city intact.

But Zedekiah unwisely attempted to throw off the rule of Babylon and revert to the policy of alliance with Egypt. This led to the savage reprisals of 586, with the wholesale destruction of the city, and most of the population being sent into exile to join friends and families who had been settled in Babylon for a decade.


4. Read ‘The Exile as a Religious Event’.

The Exile as a Religious Event

A generation like ours, which has seen on its TV screens the horrors of Baghdad and Palestine, can imagine something of what the suffering of the people of Judah must have been. For a whole nation to become refugees – sent away forcibly from its land, the homes of its people destroyed, its independence denied and its national life and institutions at an end – must be a terrible experience. But sharp as this was for the people of Judah, it was as nothing compared to the religious trauma they suffered with the destruction of Jerusalem.

For Jerusalem was the city of God, the focus of everything sacred. God’s agreement, or ‘covenant’, with his chosen people involved a big ‘IF’ which, despite His words to King David, was re-stated to Solomon:—

If you will walk before me . . . with integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you . . . then I will establish your royal throne over Israel for ever . . . If you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments . . . then I will cut Israel off from the land I have given them. (1 Kings 9:4–7).
Could the exile be a punishment from God?

After Solomon’s reign, the kingdom split in two, forming the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah (in which Jerusalem was situated). The books of 1 and 2 Kings describe the reigns of many kings of both Israel and Judah with the words, ‘He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord’. The prophets repeatedly warned both kings and people about the possible consequences of their self-willed desertion of God’s standards. There were two main areas of disobedience:

- worshipping local gods alongside the one true God of Israel, in direct disobedience of the first two commandments (Exodus 20:2–7). In some cases Israelites seem to have taken over ancient Canaanite places of worship and sacrifice (known as ‘high places’) for the worship of God; in others, the ancient Canaanite cults continued; while at some high places the worship of Israel’s God and the Canaanite gods may have gone on side by side. This sometimes suited the political strategies of the kings, who encouraged the assimilation of Canaanite religious practices and gods into the worship of Israel;

- worshipping God in the form of empty ritual, rather than by lifestyles which showed care and respect for others, in direct disobedience of the remaining eight commandments (Exodus 20:8–17).

But the Jewish people believed were secure. There were two main reasons for this:

- They believed that they were the special people whom God had chosen, and that Jerusalem was God’s specially chosen city — the place where the ark of the covenant (which symbolised God’s special relationship with them) had finally come to rest. Jerusalem was where the Temple had been built, with its Holy of Holies, where God himself dwelt. It was the outward sign of the covenant that God had made with his people that he would be their God. For 400 years sacrifices had been offered to him there daily. Even when Nebuchadnezzar had taken the city in 597, and the first exile had begun, people saw the survival of the city and the Temple as a sign that God’s covenant with his chosen people still held good. And God had promised to safeguard Jerusalem. (see 2 Samuel 7, 10–16).

- They believed that the God of Israel was not like other gods. His special name, too sacred to be spoken, was ‘Yahweh’ (translated and written as Lord in our Bibles). Unlike the gods of the other nations, who were mostly local deities associated with particular places, or people, or seasons, or communities, Yahweh was known, from the earliest times as a universal God, ‘God Almighty,’ the God of gods. And as God Almighty he claimed authority over and responsibility for not just Israel but all other nations as well.

God was also not like other gods because His character was different: He was “gracious and compassionate, long suffering, ever constant, always ready to relent and not inflict punishment” (a credal statement made many times). How could such a loving God destroy His own people?
The Experience of Exile

We have all seen something – if only at second or third hand, through TV news or documentaries – of what exile can mean to the people involved: footage from World War 2 of trainloads of people going to their chilling fate in the concentration camps; news reports from Rwanda, from Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq, of homeless, dispossessed people who have lost everything. So we can begin to imagine the sense of desolation and pain behind both the historical account of the Exile, and the religious or theological story. These were real people – and, thanks to the Old Testament’s variety – we can see glimpses of their pain and anger in passages such as Psalm 137. The words are poignant and haunting – and (as can often happen with Old Testament passages) seem modern in the sense that we can immediately understand and empathise with the deep emotion underlying them. It’s also characteristic of the Old Testament that people are able to express to God thoughts and feelings that we shrink from (such as in verses 7–8). While we might be self-conscious about expressions of violence, especially against children and babies, we may need to acknowledge that such dark and murderous passions are part of our humanity – the desire for vengeance, for seeing those who have made us suffer go through suffering in their turn. The best thing we can do with them is, through prayer, to bring them into God’s presence – as the Israelites did in this psalm.

This questioning of God after the Exile became an important part of later Jewish spirituality. It appears in many Psalms, in the Book of Job and other wisdom literature. The stories of Daniel, written about a prophet in Babylon, was probably written when Jews were being persecuted by Greeks in the 2nd century BC. The heroism of Daniel and his compatriots is an encouragement to the readers. When thrown into the blazing furnace, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego declare:

If there is a god who is able to save us from the blazing furnace, it is our God, whom we serve; he will deliver us from your Majesty’s power. But if not, be it known that we shall neither serve your gods, nor worship the gold image you have set up. Daniel 3: 17,18

But if not. it sounds like the second part of God’s warning to His people, but it is here spoken by a human. Does it mean; ‘But if God is not able to save us’ or ‘But if God chooses not to save us’? The grammar suggests the first. It is a powerful statement of commitment by Jews to their God, even when there is little sign of rescue or reward, and has been repeated through the centuries of persecution of Jews. This questioning faith has provided a robust foundation for Judaism, through many times of dispersal and persecution. The painful experience of exile also had some other positive outcomes. The Exile raised questions about the sovereignty of Yahweh, his relationship to his people, his power, not only over Israel but over all nations, his purposes – perhaps even his existence. It raised questions about the people themselves, their faithfulness to God, their role in the world as God’s representatives, their expectations of God’s covenant, the way they had exercised their responsibilities as the covenant people. It led to serious consideration of underserved suffering;
their own and other people’s. The whole of their religious identity was under scrutiny.

**Compiling the Scriptures**

This experience of Exile is profoundly important for understanding what the Old Testament is all about. Much evidence points to the fact that the Old Testament came into existence in substantially its present form in and immediately after this period of defeat, exile and religious disintegration. The Old Testament documents, therefore, are themselves a crucial part of how Israel coped with the crisis of faith we have been considering. Traditional stories were gathered together to help people understand and interpret what had happened to them – and we shall best be able to understand them if we start from the experience of religious trauma which lies behind them.

Most of the Old Testament was not actually written at this time. Much of its material is far older, and plenty of it was in existence in written form long before the Exile. Some of its stories are very old indeed, handed down by word of mouth for generations, long before they were ever written down. Most of the stories in the Pentateuch (the first five books) are of this kind. Some scholars believe that part of this material had already been collected and edited into a history of the nation’s origins at the time of David and Solomon in the tenth century BC (i.e. between 900 and 1000 BC).

If so, it was now reorganised, perhaps with other unwritten material, and some new reflections on the nation’s story. In the years after 586, when Israel was learning to cope with the results of defeat and destruction, what it needed was to be helped to face some terrible questions. At face value, Babylon had triumphed. Had the Israelites been right to worship Yahweh? Was the covenant a piece of self-delusion? Was Yahweh really in control? If so, then was he right to allow this to happen? And who was to blame? Was it the fault of the present generation, or of generations past? What about the future? Or if Yahweh was not in control, was he a God whom Israel should continue to worship and believe in at all?

In this context those who reflected on Israel’s past set out to remind the nation of its identity, to help it to understand its place in God’s purposes, and its responsibility as the covenant people, and, above all, to remember the universal claims of Yahweh, and his authority over all nations, including Babylon. So the religious literature of Israel was organised and reinterpreted in such a way as to enable Israel to make religious sense of the crisis of faith it had gone through. This interpretation and evaluation gave us, in more or less the form in which we have them today, the Old Testament books from Genesis to 2 Kings (though by no means all compiled by the same person or group of people). The Exile period also had its share of prophets – most notably Ezekiel and Second Isaiah (chapters 40–55), both of whom interpreted the Exile as the result of the people’s disobedience and disloyalty to God. Both also saw the glorious possibilities of restoration, of God creating a new community (see Ezekiel 34, especially verses 11–16), and leading people home as a second exodus (see Isaiah 43:14–21).

In 586 BC, the experience of Exile must have seemed bitter, harsh and pointless. Yet out of it came not only a renewal of vision for Israel, but the compilation of many of the Scriptures that are the backbone of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic religions.
And now the good news!

Much of what the prophets spoke and wrote was warning – for people (then, as now) were always falling short of God’s standards. God was holy and righteous, he had made a solemn covenant with his people that they constantly broke. But there was another side to the coin, for God was, and is, loving – and this had two implications for the message of the Old Testament prophets:

1. God would change his mind if people changed their behaviour and attitudes;

2. God would bring in a new covenant and a new age, when his relationship with people and with the earth would be very different.

1. God changing his mind

Human beings easily tend to see someone who changes their mind as being weak. But it can actually be a profound quality of love. God’s prophets brought threat of certain destruction if the people continued to disobey. But IF they repented, and turned back to God, God was willing – even longing – to save them.

A good example of this is found in the short and delightful book of the prophet Jonah – which some commentators have seen as an Old Testament comedy. Jonah is sent by God to another people – the pagan Ninevites – showing God’s worldwide love for humankind. The famous story of Jonah and the ‘whale’ is part of Jonah’s attempt to avoid being God’s messenger, to refuse God’s demands. When Jonah finally gets to Nineveh, he preaches repentance – and they repent! You might have thought that Jonah would be delighted at such responsiveness – and thrilled that the Ninevites’ would not suffer the terrible fate of experiencing God’s destructive anger. But no – Jonah is furious:

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, ‘O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.’

And the Lord said, ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’

( Jonah 3:10–4:4)

God went on to show Jonah that, as a prophet, his task was to take God’s message to people, not to question God’s mercy or his actions. The demands God made on Jonah involved inner change – a willingness to see things God’s way, not according to what he, as a human being, thought was right. There’s probably not a single one of us who doesn’t sympathise with Jonah – it’s always hard to behave as God would behave in a specific situation, rather than as we wish to.

2. God’s new covenant

Prophets brought hope of newness, of change, of restoration, of a different kind of covenant. Perhaps the prophet who above all others expresses hope in a time of despair is the one known as Second Isaiah (chapters 40–55), who was writing
at the time of exile to a people scattered, depressed, puzzled and scared. His opening words set the tone:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid.
(Isaiah 40:1–2)

Isaiah brings hope at a time of despair. Not a wishy-washy hope of nice thoughts for people to meditate on in their own inner lives – but a triumphant hope of God restoring the whole people of Israel, with power and with tenderness:

See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him
and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.
(Isaiah 40:10–11)

Isaiah energises Israel with fresh faith, brings hope and purpose to their despair. We sense in his poetry the longing for a fresh start – the hope that the present anguish of the people will lead them back not only to a physical and geographical restoration – the return to the land of Israel – but also to a renewed covenant relationship.

**Preparation Work (Continued)**

There are several Bible passages which you will be asked to look at in the Group Work. Please read them through as part of your preparation before the group session.

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**Group Work**

**Understanding the Exile**

1. Discuss any questions or comments arising from the reading you have done in preparation for this session.

**The influence of the Exile on the Old Testament writings**

2. Work together on either (a), (b) or (c).
Enter the preparation full group

(a) The Prophet Ezekiel

What do you think Ezekiel was saying in these passages? (The prophet Ezekiel was active among the exiled Israelites in Babylon.)

- Ezekiel 3:16–21
- Ezekiel 18:1–32
- Ezekiel 34:1–16

Think not just about the content, but how people in exile might feel when they heard (or read) these passages.

(b) Isaiah

What do you think the prophet Isaiah was saying in these passages? (They are thought to have been written by 'Second Isaiah', who was, like Ezekiel, active among the exiles in Babylon.)

- Isaiah 40:1–11
- Isaiah 42:1–9
- Isaiah 43:16–28
- Isaiah 45:18–25
- Isaiah 49:1–6.

Think not just about the content, but how people in exile might feel when they heard (or read) these passages.

(c) Histories

As you may remember from Session 4, there are two versions of Israel's history, one of which (the 'Deuteronomic history', covering the books from Judges to 2 Kings, apart from Ruth) was compiled during the Exile and the other (1 and 2 Chronicles) written about 200 years later, when the people were back in Palestine.

Compare these passages, and try to work out first, what are the differences in the accounts, and secondly, why those differences might be there (i.e. why was each writer telling the story in this particular way?).

- Compare 1 Kings 14:25–8 with 2 Chronicles 12:1–12
- Compare 1 Kings 15:1–8 with 2 Chronicles 13.

3. Share the outcomes of your discussion of Question 2.

4. Using the information and insights gained from the preparation
work, the discussions arising from Question 2, and the feedback from Question 3, discuss how you think the Exile affected the religious outlook of the Jewish people, using the following questions:

⇒ What sort of religious community do you think the Jews might have become after the Exile?
⇒ What parts of their national story might have become important for them at that time?
⇒ How might the experience of exile have affected their view of God?

6. As we have seen, much of the material in the Old Testament is much older than the Exile – but it was probably collected together during the Exile, and the way in which the story is told reflects this experience. Look at the following passages and try to decide what their relevance might be to those who had gone through the experience of exile.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group leader: ensure all four passages are covered.</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Genesis 22:1-18</td>
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<td>• Exodus 13:17 - 14:31</td>
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<td>• 2 Samuel 7:1-29</td>
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<td>• Isaiah 5:1-17</td>
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7. Feed back the results of the Bible study to the full group

Ending the Session

Pray for the present inhabitants of Middle East, those who live in their own lands and those who have been displaced.

Reading to Follow Up the Session


A fascinating book, which looks at the world of the Exile through the eyes of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah – and links this with Christians’ experience of being aliens in Western culture.
Session 9

Poems and Proverbs

Aims

- To learn something of the variety and nature of the poetry books of the Old Testament;
- To consider the book of Psalms as the Hebrew prayer book and hymn book;
- To think about the relevance and usefulness of psalms and other wisdom literature for public and private worship today.

Preparing for the Session

1. Read ‘Hebrew Poetry – What Is It?’

Hebrew Poetry – What Is It?

We have already seen that quite a lot of the prophets’ oracles were delivered in the form of poetry. But not all Old Testament poetry is found in the books of the prophets. There is also love poetry, hymns and prayers, and philosophical poems on the nature of human life, and what it means to be wise. This last category is commonly called ‘wisdom literature’. Many Christians are familiar with the poetry of the book of Psalms. But there are also two other poetry books in the Old Testament: the Song of Solomon and the book of Lamentations – both of which are works of great passion. We shall consider these very briefly, before looking more generally at the main characteristics of Hebrew poetry.

The Song of Solomon

The Song of Solomon (almost certainly not by Solomon, and often called the Song of Songs) is a passionate and erotic love poem which has caused embarrassment to scholars and readers alike as they have tried to ‘spiritualise’ it, in order to justify its place in the Bible. Christian theologians have suggested, for example, that it represents symbolically the love between Christ and his bride, the Church. But there are no real grounds for treating the book in this way. It seems better to accept it at face value: as a celebration of God-given human sexuality, and the faithful and joyful love of man and woman as parts of God’s creation.
Lamentations

Lamentations is equally passionate – but with entirely different subject-matter. In this short book the writer (traditionally claimed to be Jeremiah) pours out his heart in anguish and pain at the fall of Jerusalem and the Exile of 586 BC. The writing, though passionate in content, is highly stylised in its poetic and linguistic patterns (which we can’t easily grasp in translation) – and the poems in the book are in the form of dirges or mourning songs.

What makes a Hebrew poem?

Poetry often involves intense feelings – of great joy, or deep sadness, intense passion or profound hurt. In this, Hebrew poetry is no different from English poetry.

Throughout the 1400-year history of English poetry, the sound of words, and the rhythm of the verses, has always been important. For example, we are used to poetry in which the last words of some of the lines rhyme with each other (as in most of the hymns we sing). Hebrew poetry in Old Testament times was very different. It didn’t depend on rhyme, or even principally on rhythm, for effect: instead, what mattered was the way in which ideas were expressed.

Hebrew poetry was all about setting ideas side by side – sometimes called ‘parallelism.’

There are three main ways in which Hebrew poetry uses this technique of setting ideas side by side: for repetition, for contrast and for the development of ideas.

1. Repetition

The same idea may be expressed in two ways. Here are a couple more examples, one from Lamentations and the other from the Song of Solomon:

   How lonely sits the city that was once full of people!
   How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations!
   (Lamentations 1:1)

   My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spices, to pasture his flock in the gardens, and to gather lilies.
   (Song of Solomon 6:2)

2. Contrast

Sometimes two ideas are set together which are in tension or even conflict with other. This device is often found in all the poetry books (and most commonly of all in the book of Proverbs), for example:

   The wicked borrow, and do not pay back, but the righteous are generous and keep giving.
   (Psalm 37:21)

   Upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer.
   (Song of Solomon 3:1)

   All one’s ways may be pure in one’s own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirit.  (Proverbs 16:2)
3. Development
The poetry books of the Old Testament are full of examples of ideas that are expressed in one line and then developed in some way in the next:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
(Psalm 23:1–2)
I waited patiently for the Lord;
he inclined to me and heard my cry.
He drew me up from the desolate pit,
out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
making my footsteps sure.
(Psalm 40:1–2)

Sometimes these developments are piled on top of each other like building-blocks, to form a sort of staircase of ideas:

The idols of the nations are silver and gold,
the work of human hands.
They have mouths, but they do not speak;
they have eyes, but they do not see;
they have ears, but they do not hear,
and there is no breath in their mouths.
Those who make them, and all who trust in them,
shall become like them.
(Psalm 135:15–18)

This quotation from Psalm 135 introduces another aspect of Hebrew poetry – it is often full of laughter, particularly of a dry, reflective kind of humour that sees what is funny about the way people live and behave. In this it is not too different from the sort of humour that Jewish people still enjoy today. There is a danger that, in our concern to understand the message of the Bible and take it seriously, we miss some of the fun it pokes at us. Hebrew poetry often invites us to laugh at ourselves. Perhaps we fail to do so is because we take ourselves too seriously!

Preparation on the Psalms

2. Read the following psalms carefully:

- Psalm 1
- Psalm 8
- Psalm 30
- Psalm 51
- Psalm 84
- Psalm 100
- Psalm 116

The Psalms – Prayer and Poetry

With a very few exceptions, the psalms are not the voice of God addressing us. Rather, they are the voice of human beings, first written, composed and compiled long ago, yet with an amazing authenticity and relevance today. The Psalms speak about life as it really is – the issues and possibilities we still struggle with, the questions and the pain, the praise and the amazement. They express elation, grief and rage – sometimes in ways we find disconcerting or awkward to accept.

When we call the Psalms ‘the prayer book (or the hymn book) of the Bible’, we’re doing them an injustice if we’re judging them by many of our modern-day prayer and hymn books. For the Psalms are not a comfortable, neat expression of what we’d like the life of faith to be about. They express the whole range of human emotions before God – things which we Western Christians might hope never to feel – and if we did feel them, we’d try not to pollute our prayer-lives with them!

Trevor Dennis, an Old Testament scholar, put it thus: ‘Nowadays we come creeping up to God on our knees, fervently addressing his big toe. The Psalms show us that the Israelites marched right up to God, looked him in the eye, and gave it to him straight!’

Historical background

Date and author

Like many other books of the Old Testament, the book of Psalms is an anthology – a collection of works dating from many different periods of Israel’s history. Many of the psalms are hard to date – though the collection was first put together after the return from exile (which started to happen in 538 BC). About half of them are entitled ‘Psalm of David’ – though scholars disagree about the significance of this title. It is just possible that David composed some of the psalms that bear his name – and some psalms may indeed date back to David’s time (around 1000 BC). But we also know that many of the psalms date from the period after the return from exile. All in all, it is likely that the psalms were composed by many different people, and over a long period of time. And we must remember that authorship is an issue that held no interest in Biblical times.

What is a psalm?

Psalms were designed to be sung as a part of worship – the book of Psalms has been described by some scholars as ‘the hymnbook of the Second Temple’ (i.e. the one that was rebuilt after the return from exile). If you look at the beginning of quite a number of psalms, you can see instructions about the tunes to which they were to be sung (e.g. Psalm 69, ‘According to the Lilies’, Psalm 22, ‘according to the Deer of the Dawn’). But it also seems from their content that some of the psalms were composed for individual use, and some for corporate use in worship at the Temple.

As well as being hymns, the psalms are also prayers. Through the book of Psalms we can learn about how the Israelites saw God, thought about him and approached him.
There are actually five books within the book of Psalms, with sections beginning at Psalm 1, Psalm 42, Psalm 73, Psalm 90 and Psalm 107. Each section or book ends with a verse or two of praise to God to draw it to a satisfactory conclusion.

The Psalms and Israel’s worship
We cannot distinguish with absolute certainty between those psalms which were intended for individual and domestic use, and those which were used in Temple worship – indeed, it may not be helpful to do so, as we ourselves use them in both individual and corporate worship. When we look at our own hymn/song books we see that we use ‘I’ and ‘we’ very flexibly. It may also be that some psalms originated as poems by individuals to help them express their faith, or feelings, or experiences, to God – and that these later came into corporate use.

The Psalms and Temple festivals
Israel’s faith was in a God who acts, who is the maker of history and the guide of his people's story, who intervenes to deliver the oppressed and bring down the oppressor. Israel had experienced this intervention in the events which had made it a nation and preserved it from being consumed by the surrounding tribes. It is not surprising, therefore, that so much of Israel's worship should have taken the form of meditation on the mighty acts of God in the past. Many of the psalms reflect this process of remembrance in which the past is made present once again, so that those who worship now may feel themselves also part of the community who escaped through the Red Sea, and struggled in the wilderness.

There were three great pilgrimage feasts in the Israelite year, when worshippers came up to the Temple. These came to be called Passover (the celebration of deliverance from Egypt), the Festival of Weeks (which commemorated Yahweh’s gift of the land to Israel) and the Feast of Tabernacles (when the covenant was remembered and renewed). There must have been, scholars believe, set liturgies used at these services – though our knowledge of what actually happened at them is pretty sketchy. Psalm 81 may include an outline of the liturgy at the Feast of Tabernacles. It consists of a summons to worship, an account of Yahweh’s actions, and an appeal to hear his voice and receive his blessings.

It may also be that the psalms headed ‘A Song of Ascents’ (Psalms 120–134) were sung by pilgrims as they approached Jerusalem at festival time. Perhaps the description in Psalm 150 gives us an idea of how psalms and music were used in worship:

Praise [God] with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp!
Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe!
Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals!
(Psalm 150:3–5)

Royal psalms
A number of psalms make direct references to the king, who, as God’s anointed one, symbolises the rule of God himself (see, for example, Psalms 2 and 45, the latter of which may have been for use at royal weddings). These royal psalms may have reflected the king’s official participation in Israel’s worship, or they may
be celebrations of the kingship of Yahweh, expressed through the rule of the human king. It is clear that the psalmists prayed about their rulers and their nation: they did not keep politics out of worship!

What are the Psalms about?

Certain themes keep recurring in the psalms, so we can identify a number of distinct psalm-types. Different scholars divide these up differently, and give the categories different names. We are using a well-accepted tradition of three broad categories – psalms of praise, of lament and of thanksgiving – with a fourth, and much smaller category of psalms of meditation on God’s law. However, not every psalm necessarily fits neatly into one category, and some psalms may belong to more than one.

1. Psalms of praise

These are songs of praise and worship, written to express the glory of Yahweh, to confess his lordship over creation and his faithfulness to Israel. Sometimes they are written as if for an individual (using ‘I’), sometimes as if for a group (using ‘we’) – compare, for example, Psalms 145 and 147. These hymns have a regular pattern, which can clearly be seen by looking at Psalm 117, the shortest psalm in the book:

- they begin with an introductory call to worship:

  Praise the Lord, all you nations!
  Extol him, all you peoples!
  (verse 1)

- then comes the main section, which describes the motive for praise:

  For great is his steadfast love towards us,
  and the faithfulness of the Lord endures for ever.
  (verse 2a)

- then finally there is a recap:

  Praise the Lord!
  (verse 2b)

Many psalms of praise follow this general pattern (e.g. 33, 95, 100, 145, 148, 150). The ‘Zion Songs’ are usually included among the praise psalms. These express belief that Jerusalem has a central place in God’s plans for the world (e.g. Psalm 48). Also included are the ‘Pilgrimage Songs’ (e.g. Psalm 15) which express the joy of worshippers visiting the Temple for one of the great festivals. It is noteworthy that these Psalms are all about what God has done, and do not focus on humans. There is a temptation for us to think about our feelings and worth, even when we are praising God.

2. Psalms of lament and cursing

There is a surprisingly large number of psalms of lament – about 60 out of the 150 psalms. Laments are songs of distress, sorrow – and often bitter complaint – in the face of trouble, disaster and discouragement, sickness and death. In all types of lament psalm, the reality of chaos, disorder and disorientation is expressed. Some of them are a response to the psalmist’s own sins, and focus on confession and the search for a sense of forgiveness; some simply express
the pain and anger of loss and desolation (e.g. Psalms 6, 13, 51, 77, 102). Psalms of personal lament usually have four strands:

- a cry to God for help;
- a description of the reasons why help is needed;
- reasons put forward as to why God should hear (which may be to do with God's character or the psalmist's);
- a conclusion which often leads the psalmist back to confidence in God.

Some of the laments are communal (e.g. Psalms 44, 60, 90). These have a similar structure to individual laments, but the themes tend to be more about the life of the nation. They refer to defeat in battle, threats to the well-being of Israel and the cries of exiles, but also to the complaint of the poor oppressed by injustice.

A ‘sub-group’ of the lament psalms are the psalms of anger and cursing – which often demand vengeance (e.g. Psalms 35, 58, 109). These can cause problems for Christian readers today. What are we to make of such prayers? Should we omit them from Christian worship?

Earlier work on the covenant has shown how central that idea was to Israel’s relationship with God. It revolved around a big ‘IF.’ IF his people kept their side of the covenant, God’s love and faithfulness knew no bounds. But what if it seemed that God had not kept His part of the covenant? This is the agonised question explored in the book of Job and in much of Jeremiah’s personal anguish. Like Job, the Psalmists take the question to God: “Are you there?” “Do you still care?” As we have seen in last session’s work on the Exile, the Jews did not hesitate to express their doubts and question God, even demanding an answer. Much of wisdom writing is concerned with an issue which vexes us – why do people suffer? It was clear that, though one might speak in broad terms of God punishing His people, that the punishment did not fall equally on the righteous and the unrighteous, and it might look as though God Himself was not acting fairly.

The fact that we find these words difficult may say as much about us, and our reluctance as a church to address the darker issues, as about the psalmist. For in these passages the psalmist is opening up the depth and reality of his feelings to God. Such honesty with ourselves – never mind with God in prayer – is painful, and, for that reason, rare. But it may be the only way in which we can work through our own negative feelings and come to share the mind of God, instead of harbouring unspoken and suppressed feelings of hostility, hatred and pain.

### 3. Psalms of thanksgiving

Psalms of thanksgiving contain elements of both the hymn of praise and the lament. The main characteristic of psalms of thanksgiving is that they look back to a time when the psalmist cried to God for help – and God responded to that cry, as a result of which the psalmist now sings ‘a new song’. Walter Brueggemann describes psalms of lament as being about ‘disorientation’ and psalms of thanksgiving as being about ‘reorientation’ – which expresses their difference, and their relationship to each other, rather well.
Again, these are of both communal and individual types, and have a recognisable pattern. We shall illustrate this with Psalm 116, an example of an individual's thanksgiving hymn:

- **Introduction** (verses 1-2), in which the individual offers praise to Yahweh;
- **Main section** (verses 3-9), which tells of past experience:
  - (a) a description of the psalmist's previous distress (verse 3);
  - (b) recollection of the cry for help (verse 4);
  - (c) Yahweh's response to his prayer (verses 8-9);
- **Conclusion** (verses 12-14) - praise to Yahweh for deliverance.

Other thanksgiving psalms include Psalms 40, 92, 118, 107, 124 138.

4. **Psalms of meditation on the law**

This very small group of psalms was definitely not connected to Temple worship, but has a central theme of meditation on God's law (Psalms 1; 19:7-14; 119). Psalm 119 is the longest psalm of all; its verse-pattern is based on the Hebrew alphabet, being written in a series of eight-line stanzas, each line of the same stanza beginning with the same letter of the alphabet. This elaborate patterning is wholly lost in translation. Almost every verse of Psalm 119 refers to the law under one description or another - instruction, word, statutes, promise, decree, commandments, precepts, etc.

These psalms are, in their content, much simpler and more straightforward than other types of psalm. In them, those who study the law are wise and blessed; those who don't are foolish and wicked. It all seems neat and simple, too straightforward, after the sometimes shocking honesty of the other types of psalms: but sometimes life is like that!

It seems likely that such psalms are relatively late, probably from the period after the Exile when the synagogue was beginning to develop as an alternative focus of religious life to the Temple. These psalms also point to another pattern of religious experience – one in which worship at the Temple would be replaced by the personal religious development of the disciple.

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### Preparation on Wisdom

4. **Read the following passages from the Old Testament:**

- Proverbs 15:1–33
- Ecclesiastes 1:1–11
- Job 29:1–20; 30:9–23
- Job 38:1–41

These passages are all examples of ‘wisdom literature’. Can you find anything that they have in common, that might make you think
they were the same type of writing?

5. Read ‘All Things Wise and Wonderful’.

**All Things Wise and Wonderful**

The Old Testament books of Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are grouped together by scholars as ‘wisdom literature’ – a style of writing which was found in other ancient Middle Eastern cultures of the time (especially Egypt and Assyria). Yet these books seem very different from each other, containing poetry, stories, proverbial sayings, philosophy, lists – having some passages are about people, real or imaginary, and some solely about ideas. So in what way are they similar?

There are four distinct features shared by wisdom literature, which set these books apart from other Old Testament writings:

1. **Their purpose**;
2. **Their view of God**;
3. **Their view of society**;
4. **Their view of the individual**.

**1. Purpose**

The aim of these books (and of a few psalms, such as Psalms 1 and 119) is to teach and instruct in wise living. In their different ways, their underlying theme can be expressed in the verse: ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’ (Proverbs 1:7) – ‘fear’ meaning reverence and worship, not terror. These wisdom books are not necessarily about wisdom – some express a wise point of view, rather than explicitly writing about wisdom itself.

The statement, ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’, is particularly profound when we consider what wisdom meant in Old Testament times. It had to do with the skills of everyday living, whether at court or in the market-place or at home. To be wise meant knowing how to handle relationships with other people, how to manage business shrewdly, how to do your daily work well. Wisdom involved knowing the ropes, having discernment and good judgement. Wisdom might include intellectual achievement – but it principally meant knowing how to succeed in your own area of life, whatever that may be – as a parent, a child, a courtier, a ruler.

Wisdom in the Bible includes making the right moral decisions. The fool isn’t someone brainless, but someone who lacks discernment, makes wrong moral choices and has poor judgement. To say that the foundation of wisdom was ‘the fear of the Lord’ is to claim that, whatever other powers of mind, and skills of life, a person may have, if these are not founded upon a living relationship of trust and confidence in Yahweh, then they will, in the end, turn out to be worthless.
2. Views of God

God the creator
In wisdom literature, God is seen mainly as the creator – unlike the Pentateuch or the books of the prophets, where God is seen and depicted in terms of his covenant with Israel, and of their national history. Indeed, Wisdom is described as the agent by which God created the world (Proverbs 3:19–20) – and God teaches Job about ultimate wisdom (that is, wisdom which is greater even than moral issues) by revealing himself as the supreme creator, who continues to create and lovingly to sustain the world that he has made (Job chapters 38–41).

God through human experience
Much of the Old Testament presents a picture of a changing society, responding – or, more usually, failing to respond – to God’s laws, There is a quality of action about it, and God is a correspondingly dynamic God. But wisdom literature is quite different. It is static and reflective instead of dynamic and visionary – and thus its way of understanding and approaching God is different too. It attempts to understand the ways of God through the painstaking observation and cataloguing of the everyday experiences of humankind, rather than through the rise and fall of nations.

3. Views of society
The prophets addressed very specific events and situations, set in a particular historical context – whereas wisdom literature isn’t obviously related to a moment in history or society. The various sections of Proverbs, for instance, are notoriously difficult to date, partly because the book contains no references to any historical events, and its wise and pithy sayings could apply equally well in almost any social setting.

The prophets were often critical of society – as we saw in Session 8. Wisdom literature (especially the book of Proverbs) tends to support the status quo – and back up the prevailing social standards, making an unquestioned assumption that they are right:

Like vinegar to the teeth, and smoke to the eyes,
so are the lazy to their employers.
(Proverbs 10:26)
The dread anger of a king is like the growling of a lion;
anyone who provokes him to anger forfeits life itself.
It is honourable to refrain from strife,
but every fool is quick to quarrel.
(Proverbs 20:1–3)

How different are these last two verses from the approach to life and royalty shown by the prophets!

Job’s ultimate reality
This is where the book of Job offers a much deeper and more complex understanding of the world. For Job is righteous, admired in his society, apparently wise, discerning – and therefore (according to the teaching of Proverbs) wealthy and successful. But Job loses everything. His friends, who
represent the society of his day, offer him the kind of wisdom that comes out of Christmas crackers – neat answers, pat phrases: ‘You must have sinned, even if you can’t remember it’, they say. ‘Only people who have done wrong suffer like you’re suffering!’

The wisdom that God reveals to Job is greater and deeper even than the wisdom of doing right, of being a pillar of society. God reveals that the ‘wisdom language’ of uprightness, integrity, virtue and moral responsibility is limited – and that there is a greater language of power, awe, mystery, amazement, daring, miracle. Job has said, ‘I will hold on to my integrity till I die!’ But God shows him that integrity and virtue, while fine in themselves, can nevertheless be a screen against the awesome reality of God. Being right is no substitute for being amazed. In the light of this understanding, Job is once again restored to prosperity and a position of social prestige, but seeing it now in the context of ‘things too wonderful for me which I did not know’ (Job 42:3).

4. Views of the individual

Much of the Old Testament focuses on God, and on the people of Israel and God’s relationship with them as a community. The wisdom books aren’t interested in the revelation of God in Israel’s history – the unique relationship between God and his chosen people, played out in the historical drama of Israelite national life. They are interested instead in how human beings live, the choices they make, and the basis for those choices. Wisdom literature concentrates not on God or on the community, but on the individual – perhaps that is why books like Ecclesiastes speak so powerfully to our individualistic society today.

Ecclesiastes describes the painful struggle of an individual looking for meaning in life. What is it all for? Where is it all leading? What’s the point of anything? These are the questions with which the writer is wrestling. For much of the book, he seems to conclude that life is meaningless – yet at the very end, he seems to reach some kind of resolution:

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgement, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.

(Ecclesiastes 12:13–14)

The individual’s experience counts

Wisdom literature describes people whose minds work very like our own. They believe first and foremost in the evidence of their senses. Wise people observe, catalogue, analyse, reflect on what they see, and draw general conclusions from it. They do not start with the word of the Lord, but with the data of everyday life – the way thorns crackle when they are set alight in the fire, the way drips fall from the roof on a rainy day, the way money slips through your fingers.

Some wise people even seem to have been interested in things simply for their own sake, and not just for the way they can serve as metaphors for human experience. See, for instance, the ‘numerical proverbs’ in Proverbs 30:15–31, or the detailed descriptions of the world of nature in God’s answer to Job (Job chapters 38–41). This is not sociology or natural history – but it is sufficiently
close to things we are familiar with (like statistics, opinion polls, and issues of the environment), for us to feel that it is not totally alien to our way of thinking.

In the wisdom writings, then, we make contact with an important strand of the life and faith of Israel that would otherwise be hidden from us – the everyday experience of ordinary people. And there is sufficient evidence in the rest of the Old Testament for us to be pretty sure that this was a strand of Israelite life that was always there, and always regarded as another way of encountering the lordship of God (see, for instance, Jeremiah 18:18, which speaks of ‘the counsel of the wise’ alongside, and as of equivalent authority to ‘the law of the priest’ and ‘the word of the prophet’).

One finds echoes of this approach in Paul’s acknowledgement of the Spirit of God at work in all human understanding of the world (Acts 17, 22-31) and contemporary appreciation of the values of insights from members of other faiths, and none.

Group Work

The Psalms in Israel’s worship

1. In what ways do you see similarities between Israel’s worship and our own, and what differences are there?

The Psalms in worship today

2. Look again at the psalms listed in Task 2 of the preparation work. Choose two which seem most appropriate to you for use in Christian worship today. Discuss together the reasons for your choice.

The discomfort of the Psalms

3. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann has written:

The Church has not caught the force of the pain expressed in the book of Psalms, and has ignored the element of complaint . . . Indeed, the prayer of lament and complaint has often been thought quite out of place in Christian worship. The consequences of such neglect are clear: Christians, either as individuals or communities, have not been permitted to express many of their feelings in worship, and while they have been able to provide communities which pray for those in distress, they have been much less successful in forming ones to which those in distress can belong, and in which they can cry their pain.

⇒ Do you agree with this? (give your reasons why, or why not)

⇒ Do you think we should miss out the psalms or verses we find awkward or difficult?
Would it be constructive and helpful, or destructive and unhelpful, if we prayed to God as the Psalmists did?

Wisdom literature then and now

4. What did you make of the passages you read for Task 4 of the preparation work?

⇒ Can you see, in the light of your reading, why wisdom literature has a place in the Bible?

5. What use do you think the wisdom literature of the Old Testament may have for us, as twentieth-century Christians? Are there insights it can teach us about:

- God?
- ourselves?
- different lifestyles and life-choices?

Reading to Follow up the Session

This gives a good description of the historical background to the Psalms, especially the religious and royal context in which they were used after the return from exile,

Walter Brueggemann, Praying the Psalms, St Mary’s Press.
This relates the psalms to our own situations, bridging the gap between ancient Israel’s experience and our own in our ‘disorientation’ and, by God’s grace, ‘reorientation’. Thought provoking, and helpful in using the psalms for personal devotions.

A booklet which is full of rich insights into the content of the Psalms, and how they can help us in our Christian worship.

Tremper Longman, How to Read the Psalms, IVP
Unit One Reflection Form

Each group member must fill in a reflection form at the end of each unit of the Foundations for Ministry course. This can be done as part of the final group session, either in pairs or individually. The purpose of these forms is to enable each person to reflect on the previous term’s work, in order both to consolidate their learning and to deepen their awareness of their personal growth in discipleship. There are NO “right” answers: it is purely a means of helping you to reflect and grow.

Name:

Unit of course which has just been completed: 1 2 3

Try to recall your thoughts and reactions to this unit of the course before you started it, and make a note of them here (e.g. I hate/love history, so I was dreading/looking forward to Unit 1):

Look back through the course material to remind yourself of the different sessions.

- What have you most enjoyed about this Unit?

- What has been hardest?

- What has been most helpful?
What have you learned from studying this unit of the course about:

- the subject?

- yourself?

How might you use what you have learned in your life as a follower of Jesus Christ?

How would you evaluate your contribution to the group?

LEADER’S COMMENTS (optional)
In discussion with the group member, comment briefly on what you have observed of him/her during the past term in terms of learning/understanding, and/or group contributions. Also include (if appropriate) comments on the group member’s assignment.
Assignment for Part 1

You should write an essay on one of the following topics. You should aim to write up to 1000 words, and include sufficient examples from the Bible, and especially the Old Testament, to demonstrate extensive reading of it. (You do not need to write out Biblical texts in full, references to passages used will suffice).

Examine the relationship between our individual stories of faith, the stories of those with whom we share faith now, and the stories, factual and otherwise, contained in the Bible.

(Look at Session 1 and session 5)

How important was the idea of covenant in the religious experience of Israel up to the fall of Jerusalem?

(Look at Sessions 6, 7 and 8).

What impact did the experience of exile have on Israel’s understanding of her relationship with God?

(Look at Sessions 8 and 9)

How would our understanding of Israel’s faith be different if the Psalms and the Wisdom literature were not included in the Old Testament?

(Look at Session 9)

Assignments should be submitted to your course tutor.