



Adelaide College

Fear the Lord and be wise

Restoration After the Exile

The Foundations for Building a Spiritual People

Lecture 1: Introduction and Background

God and the Jews, His Covenant People

The Patriarchs

Jewish history begins with the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The account of the lives of these fathers of the Jewish nation is found in the Book of Genesis, meaning Beginning. They lived round about the 20th Century B.C.

Abraham, at first named Abram, was called by the Lord to leave his home in the city of Ur and his homeland of Chaldea, near the Persian Gulf. He travelled north with his father and family along the river Euphrates, through Babylonia and Assyria to the city of Haran in N.W. Mesopotamia, where Abram's father, Terah, died (Gen. 1:31-32). Abram then continued his journey with his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot. They headed southwest through Syria to the land of Canaan. The call of God to Abram was accompanied by a promise that he would be made into a great nation and that all the peoples on earth would be blessed through him (Gen. 12:1-5). He was told that the land of Canaan would be given to his descendants (Gen. 12:7). For a time he went down into Egypt because of famine in Canaan (Gen. 12:10).

The journey from Ur in Chaldea to Egypt took the form of an upside down crescent. This strip of land is known as the Fertile Crescent because the whole length of the crescent is fertile for many hundreds of miles surrounded by vast areas of desert and wilderness.

The Lord entered into a covenant with Abram. This involved animal sacrifice (Gen. Ch. 15), the rite of circumcision for all males, and a change of his name (Gen. Ch. 17). Abram (The Father on High) was changed to Abraham (The Father of Many). His wife's name Sarai became Sarah (both meaning Princess). The details of Abraham's exploits and trials of faith along with those of his son Isaac, Isaac's son, Jacob, and Jacob's son, Joseph, form the main subject of the Book of Genesis. The book closes with this growing family of the Patriarchs living in Egypt under the protection of the Pharaoh because Joseph had become his Minister of State Affairs, and because of famine in Canaan.

Entry into the Promised Land

The story of the Jewish people, who at this time were known as the Hebrews, moves on to about the 15th Century B.C. in the Book of Exodus, so called because it relates the miraculous exodus of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses. The defining moments in the account of the exodus are: 1) the call of Moses by God to lead the people out of Egypt (Ex. Ch. 3); 2) the ten plagues, which God brought on the Egyptians to make them release the Hebrews (Ex. Chs. 7-11); and 3) the observance of the first Feast of Passover to commemorate how on the night they left Egypt the Lord passed over His people but struck down the firstborn of the Egyptians (Ex. Ch. 12).

The exodus was followed by the journey through the wilderness of Sinai, between Egypt and the land of Canaan. The main features of this journey include: 1) the giving of the Law of God, notably the Ten Commandments, in the wilderness at Mount Sinai (Ex. Ch. 20); 2) the construction of the Tabernacle, a portable Temple, and its furniture (Ex. Chs. 25-40); 3) the giving of regulations in the Book of Leviticus for the way in which the priests of the tribe of Levi were to perform animal sacrifices, and the ordination of the priests (Lev. Chs. 1-8), followed by regulations to do with hygiene, religious observances, and feasts (Lev. Chs. 9-27); 4) the numbering of the people in the Book of Numbers (Num. Ch. 1); and 5) the various rebellions of the people against the Lord, especially their refusal to meet the challenge of conquering the Promised Land, with the result that God condemned His people to wander in the wilderness for 40 years until all the adults of that generation had died (Num. Chs. 12-20).

The first stage of the entry into the Promised Land after the 40 years of wandering was the conquest of the nations east of the river Jordan (Num. Chs. 21-25, 31), and the giving of Transjordan to the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh (Num. Ch. 32). While the Hebrews were still on the east side of the river Jordan Moses reviewed the laws of God with the people, their exploits and their failings in the wilderness journeys. This is recorded in the Book of Deuteronomy, which means Second Law, because it reviews God's Laws. The death of Moses is recorded at the end of the book (Deut. Ch. 34). He was the greatest person in Old Testament (OT) history from a spiritual point of view.

The completion of the story of the entry into the Promised Land is found in the Book of Joshua, so called because after the death of Moses Joshua became the leader of the people. The book describes two main campaigns into Canaan, one to the south and one to the north. It also recounts the settling of the rest of the people (9 ? tribes) in the land west of the river Jordan. But the land was not completely taken at this time, as seen in the Books of Joshua and Judges.

The Period of the Judges and the Early Monarchy

The Book of Judges describes how at this time, over a period of a few hundred years, the people fell into idolatrous and sinful ways by copying the lifestyle of the Canaanites, the original inhabitants of the land. As a result the Lord allowed their enemies to overcome them until they cried out for deliverance. God delivered them through the judges, so called not because they officiated in courts of law but because they were local tribe leaders. They delivered the people when they were being oppressed by their enemies, particularly the Midianites and the Philistines. One of the most well known

judges is Samson, famed for his strength (Jud. Chs. 13-16). The most outstanding person towards the end of this period was Samuel, the last of the judges and the first of the great prophets. The main events of his life are told in the Books of 1 & 2 Samuel.

The reign of David (ca. 1000-961 B.C.) was looked back on by Israel in the centuries, which followed as the greatest period of their history. This was not only because Israel, as a united people, became a major force in the affairs of the Middle East, but also because David was a deeply spiritual man, as can be seen in the many psalms (spiritual songs), which he wrote and which are preserved in the Book of Psalms. The Jewish nation in later generations longed for another Son of David to arise, and gradually the belief developed that God would one day send such a man to be their Messiah or Anointed One. This belief is found in a number of inspired passages in the Old Testament.

The Divided Kingdoms of Israel and Judah

David was succeeded by his son Solomon, a man renowned for his wisdom. Many of his wise sayings are found in the Book of Proverbs. The account of his reign (ca. 961-922 B.C.), and notably the building of the temple in Jerusalem, is found in the Book of 1 Kings Chs. 1-11. In some ways Solomon was not very wise. He married a number of foreign women, and this encouraged the worship of foreign gods in the land; also he taxed the people heavily to pay for his ambitious building schemes. His son Rehoboam was even more foolish. He had no concern for the people. This led to the split of the nation into two kingdoms: Israel in the north and Judah in the south with Rehoboam as king (1 Kings 12:24).

Since the time of David, Jerusalem was regarded as the spiritual centre for the nation, but when the nation divided into two kingdoms, the cities of Bethel and Dan in the north were set up as rival centres for worship, but it was in effect the worship of idols (1 Kings 12:26-30). The division of the nation into two kingdoms, with a rival royal house in the north which continued to encourage idol worship, was regarded by the Jewish historians of the Books of 1 & 2 Kings (and the parallel books of 1 & 2 Chronicles) as a great sin (1 Kings 12:30). The first king of Israel was Jeroboam and he was the one who set up a rival and idolatrous temple. The constant refrain in 1 Kings is how the kings who followed continued "walking in the ways of Jeroboam and in his sin, which he had caused Israel to commit" (1 Kings 15:34 and 16:19)

The Exile

The prophets of both kingdoms also condemned the nation. From the 8th century onwards in particular the ruling and middle classes became very wealthy to a large extent by exploiting the majority of the population who were very poor. Prophets like Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and others condemned the unrighteousness of the upper classes and that a time would come when the nation would be punished by God in the form of foreign invasion. But their preaching was largely ignored, and they were badly treated. The judgment of God caught up with Israel when it fell to the super-power of the day, the Assyrians, who ruled vast tracts of the Middle East from their capital city Nineveh. They took Israel into exile ca. 722 B.C. (2 Kings 24:17:1-18). The southern kingdom of Judah lasted another 100 years, but they too were taken into exile by the succeeding

super-power, the Babylonians (2 Kings 24:18-25:21), who ruled from the city of Babylon. The people of Judah were deported by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in three waves, first the ruling class and the artisans in 597 B.C., second the population of Jerusalem which entailed the destruction of the city and the temple in 587 B.C., and thirdly most of the rest of the population of Judah in 582 B.C. Much of the detail of the last days of Judah is given in 2 Kings Chs. 24 & 25.

The Lord of History

During the exile the Babylonians were defeated by a third great power, the Persians, whose capital city was Shushan or Susa. It was the Persians, under king Cyrus, who allowed the Jews and other peoples to return home. The Bible makes it clear that these historical events were not caused simply by the successive rise and fall of these great powers. God was behind these events controlling international affairs. For example, Isaiah prophesied the downfall of the Assyrian king Sennacherib and the destruction of his great army when he besieged Jerusalem at the end of the 8th Century B.C. (Isa. Ch. 37). He also prophesied that it would be the Babylonians who would destroy the kingdom of Judah (Isa. 39:5-7). The Lord, through the prophet Jeremiah, called the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, “my servant” (Jer. 25:9), and he prophesied that the exile would last for 70 years (Jer. 25:11, 12). Isaiah prophesied about events long after his own time when he said that God would raise up Cyrus as “his anointed” and would summon him by name “to subdue nations” for the sake of His people, i.e. to bring them back to their land (Isa. 45:1-7).

The return of the exiles, the conditions which faced them at their return, the rebuilding of the temple and the walls of Jerusalem, and the prophets and leaders who played a prominent part in this post-exilic period, all this is dealt with in details in the lecture, which follow.

The Bible depicts God as the Lord of history. History is His-story, and particularly the story of His Son Jesus. The Old Testament contains many prophecies about the One who would come as the Messiah or Anointed One, another “son of David”, to save His people, and not only the Jews but also He would save people throughout the nations of the world. God fulfilled these prophecies by sending His son Jesus to die on the cross for us. In this way God kept His promise to Abraham when he said, “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:3). This is why Jesus is described as “the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1).

