

RESTORED BUT NOT YET REDEEMED

The Beginnings of Second Temple Judaism

Introduction

This presentation will explore the beginnings of what is often called “Second Temple Judaism” which refers to the new phase of Judaism following the Babylonian Exile (587 – 539 BC). It will do so by looking at the following:

- A brief survey of the history of Israel leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem (587 BC).
- Prophetic warnings of the end of the Sinai Covenant and First Temple Judaism.
- Prophetic oracles of restoration.
- A Study Text Jeremiah 31:
- A brief survey of the history of the Exile and the beginnings of Second Temple Judaism.
- The “failure of prophecy.”
- The beginnings of biblical interpretation (Ezra and Jesus Ben Sira).
- A Study Text: Sirach.

A brief survey of biblical history leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem (587 BC)

The main events are as follows:

- The period of the United Kingdom of Israel and Judah under David (1000-962 BC) and Solomon (962-922 BC)
- Building of the First Temple (957 BC)
- Civil war and partition into the separate Kingdoms of Israel and Judah (922 BC)
- The Kingdom of Israel (922-722 BC). Destruction by the Assyrians
- The Kingdom of Judah (922-587 BC). Destruction by the Babylonians

Prophetic warnings of the end of the Sinai Covenant and First Temple Judaism

The prophetic literature does not consist of books written by the historical prophets. literary authors. The names appearing in the titles of the prophetic books identify the content of those words with particular prophets. In general these prophetic works are the words of the prophet remembered, collected and edited by others.

The history of the formation of the Prophetic Books is quite complicated and differs from book to book. Nonetheless a few general observations can be made:

- The prophet's disciples gathered together and wrote down oracles, sermons and other prose or poetic material that originated with the prophets. In some cases such material preserved the prophets' words, but in others the text reflects the disciples' paraphrasing.
- To this the disciples added biographical recollections giving the books topical or chronological order.
- The books as we have them were edited *after the Exile* (i.e. after 538 BC). Since the editors were post-Exilic, they had the experience of seeing the prophetic warnings fulfilled. They also experienced prophecy during and after the Exile. As a result of this, the editors tended to place *woe oracles* (warnings of forthcoming doom) at the beginning of the books and *weal oracles* (oracles of restoration) The central message of the prophets was that YHWH would redeem his people by the defeat of his people's enemies.

Essentially the prophets accused the rulers and leaders of Israel and Judah of failing to live by the conditions of the Sinai covenant which was conditional:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, **if** you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation ... (Exodus 19:4-6)

The prophets proclaimed that the conditions of the Sinai covenant had not been fulfilled by Israel and therefore God would end the relationship.

Amos (Israel: 750 BC)

Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,
and lounge on their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the stall;
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David improvise on instruments of music;
who drink wine from bowls,
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.
The Lord GOD has sworn by himself
(says the LORD, the God of hosts):
I abhor the pride of Jacob
and hate his strongholds;
and I will deliver up the city and all that is in it.

(Amos 6:4-8)

Isaiah (Judah: 742 – 700 BC)

Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth;
for the LORD has spoken:
I reared children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me.
The ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master's crib;
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.
Ah, sinful nation,
people laden with iniquity,
offspring who do evil,
children who deal corruptly,
who have forsaken the LORD,
who have despised the Holy One of Israel,
who are utterly estranged!

(Isaiah 1:2-4)

At that time the LORD had spoken to Isaiah son of Amoz, saying, “Go, and loose the sackcloth from your loins and take your sandals off your feet,” and he had done so, walking naked and barefoot.

(Isaiah 2:2)

Zephaniah (Judah: 628 – 622 BC)

I will utterly sweep away everything
from the face of the earth, says the LORD.
I will sweep away humans and animals;
I will sweep away the birds of the air
and the fish of the sea.
I will make the wicked stumble.
I will cut off humanity
from the face of the earth, says the LORD.
I will stretch out my hand against Judah,
and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem;

(Zephaniah 1:2-4)

Jeremiah (Judah: 626 – 587 BC)

Thus said the LORD to me, “Go and buy yourself a linen loincloth, and put it on your loins, but do not dip it in water.” So I bought a loincloth according to the word of the LORD, and put it on my loins. And the word of the LORD came to me a second time, saying, “Take the loincloth that you bought and are wearing, and go now to the Euphrates, and hide it there in a cleft of the rock.”

(Jeremiah 13:1-4)

Thus said the LORD: Go and buy a potter’s earthenware jug. Take with you some of the elders of the people and some of the senior priests, and go out to the valley of the son of Hinnom at the entry of the Potsherd Gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you.

Then you shall break the jug in the sight of those who go with you, and shall say to them: Thus says the LORD of hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter’s vessel, so that it can never be mended.

(Jeremiah 19:1-2.10)

However, the prophets also had a sense that the end of the current relationship was not the end of the relationship between God and Israel. They had a sense that God would do something new. God would restore the relationship in a new way and establish a New Covenant. Again some examples:

Zephaniah (Judah: 628 – 622 BC)

At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the LORD.

(Zephaniah 3:20)

Second Isaiah (Babylon: 540 BC)

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,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.
A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

(Isaiah 40:1-5)

Discussion Text: Jeremiah 31:15-20

- 15 Thus says the LORD:
A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more.
- 16 Thus says the LORD:
Keep your voice from weeping,
and your eyes from tears;
for there is a reward for your work,
says the LORD:
they shall come back from the land of the enemy;
- 17 there is hope for your future,
says the LORD:
your children shall come back to their own country.
- 18 Indeed I heard Ephraim pleading:
“You disciplined me, and I took the discipline;
I was like a calf untrained.
Bring me back, let me come back,
for you are the LORD my God.
- 19 For after I had turned away I repented;
and after I was discovered, I struck my thigh;
I was ashamed, and I was dismayed
because I bore the disgrace of my youth.”
- 20 Is Ephraim my dear son?
Is he the child I delight in?
As often as I speak against him,
I still remember him.
Therefore I am deeply moved for him;
I will surely have mercy on him,
says the LORD.

Questions to help discussion:

- What are the key words that struck you?
- What is the tone of the text?
- What image of God do you find here?
- Verse 20e reads (NRSV): “Therefore I am deeply moved for him,” but literally the Hebrew reads: “Therefore my womb trembles for him.” How might this impact on your understanding of the text?

A brief survey of the history of the Exile and the beginnings of Second Temple Judaism

- The Babylonian Exile (587 – 538 BC)
 - Destruction of Jerusalem and Temple (587 BC)
 - End of the Monarchy
 - End of Priesthood
 - End of Liturgy
 - Exile
- Judea under the rule of the Persians (538 – 333 BC)
 - Restoration of Priesthood and Liturgy
 - Respect for Judaism and its laws and customs
 - Slow rebuilding building the Second Temple (537 – 516 BC)
- The prophetic hoped-for restoration does not occur
- Judea under Alexander the Great and the Rule of the Egyptians (333 – 199 BC)
 - Greek culture dominates everything
 - Jewish Society fragments
 - Wealthy urban Jews assimilate to Greek ways
 - Rural poor hold fast to traditional religion
- Judea under the Rule of Syria and the Maccabean Struggle for Freedom (199 – 175 BC)
 - Jewish laws and customs no longer respected.
 - Breakup of Jewish society.
 - Maccabean Revolt

The beginnings of biblical interpretation

- Formation of the text of the Law (Pentateuch)
- Ezra
 - 440 BC
 - Relative of last High Priest of the First Temple and of the first High Priest of the Second Temple
 - Priest and **Scribe**
 - Nehemiah 8:1-8
 - Beginning of a trajectory from prophecy to biblical interpretation
- Jesus Ben Sira
 - 200 BC
 - Scribe (Scholar)
 - Fragmentation of Jewish society reaching crisis point
 - Wisdom
 - Sirach 38:34 – 39:11
- New trajectory: Scribe → Pharisaic Scribe → Rabbi → Rabbinic Judaism

Discussion Text: Sirach 38:34 39:11

38

³⁴ How different the one who devotes himself
to the study of the law of the Most High!

39 He seeks out the wisdom of all the ancients,
and is concerned with prophecies;

² he preserves the sayings of the famous
and penetrates the subtleties of parables;

³ he seeks out the hidden meanings of proverbs
and is at home with the obscurities of parables.

⁴ He serves among the great
and appears before rulers;
he travels in foreign lands
and learns what is good and evil in the human lot.

⁵ He sets his heart to rise early
to seek the Lord who made him,
and to petition the Most High;
he opens his mouth in prayer
and asks pardon for his sins.

⁶ If the great Lord is willing,
he will be filled with the spirit of understanding;
he will pour forth words of wisdom of his own
and give thanks to the Lord in prayer.

⁷ The Lord will direct his counsel and knowledge,
as he meditates on his mysteries.

⁸ He will show the wisdom of what he has learned,
and will glory in the law of the Lord's covenant.

⁹ Many will praise his understanding;
it will never be blotted out.
His memory will not disappear,
and his name will live through all generations.

¹⁰ Nations will speak of his wisdom,
and the congregation will proclaim his praise.

¹¹ If he lives long, he will leave a name greater than a thousand,
and if he goes to rest, it is enough for him.

Questions to help discussion:

- What are the key words that struck you?
- What is the tone of the text?
- What are the characteristics of the scribal exegete?
- What is the “wisdom” God has given to Israel according to Ben Sira
- Is Ben Sira an assimilated Jew or a traditionalist? Why?