



Evolution of Faith

Session 4

May 8, 2023

Opening Prayer:

Gracious God:

We thank you for inspiring us to gather as seekers in the wilderness. As we reflect on the inspired Word of God, we ask for the grace to accept Your wisdom and humility, to open our minds and hearts to understanding, and live in the wonder and awe of Your work in creation. We rejoice in Your love, mercy, and forgiveness, and set our sights on hope in the Resurrection. We offer our praise through Your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Restoration and Fall of Israel

Bible Break – Torah, Nevi'im, Ketuvim

- The Pentateuch consists of the first five books of the bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These make up the Mosaic Law (all 613 Laws).

Nevi'im (The Prophets)

Return to Jerusalem:

Assembly of the Hebrew Scriptures

While it may seem odd to spend time on assembling the Hebrew Scriptures, it became a key element of the restoration of Israel.

- The canonization of the Hebrew Bible never had a formal religious council to determine the contents. The Hebrew Bible grew by degrees, adding new documents as Israel's writers, over many generations, recorded and interpreted the community's political and spiritual experiences.
- As the result of a long period of literary development, canonization took place as Judean priests, scribes and other religious leaders gradually accepted the religious authority of a particular book or set of books. (Judean = inhabitants of Judea and areas around Jerusalem and the southern kingdom.)

Following their return from the Babylonian exile, Judean religious leaders assembled and edited their people's traditions, both oral and written – an essential task to strengthen and unify a largely dispirited group who were undergoing a crisis of identity as Yahweh's chosen people.

Persian administrators encouraged the publication of Judean religious laws and Mosaic legal traditions. They were edited and reshaped into five books called the Pentateuch, and were binding all Jews together as a nation.

The Nevi'im was generally accepted around 200 BCE by most Jewish leaders. The third section of the Hebrew Bible, Ketuvim (Writings) was compiled and accepted around 132 BCE in Egypt.

According to ancient tradition, the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures was determined at the Academy of Jamnia in about 90 CE. The purpose was to restructure Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. However, most scholars believe that no such action took place at that meeting, with even some taking the position that no such meeting ever convened.

The period between two Jewish revolts against Rome (66-73 CE and 132-135 CE), witnessed the gradual evolution of a standard biblical text – a prototype to the later Masoretic Text (1008 CE), the medieval manuscripts on which modern translations of the Hebrew Bible are based.

The Second Canon

- In the first century CE, Rabbis decided not to recognize about some books as authoritative Scripture.
- Early Christians which used Greek editions regarded these books as **deuterocanonical**. In Catholic and Greek Orthodox traditions, deuterocanonical books were interspersed within the Prophets and the Writings. The Russian Orthodox considered them to be authoritative, but not as important as the Old Testament and New Testament writings.
- The Protestant and modern Jewish traditions do not include them, and called them **Apocrypha** (supplementary).
- These Books include:
 - 1 and 2 Maccabees
 - Additions to Daniel
 - Tobit
 - Judith
 - Additions to Esther
 - Baruch
 - Letter of Jeremiah
 - Ecclesiasticus (ben Sirach)
 - Wisdom of Solomon
 - 2 Endras - Ezra (Orthodox Traditions only)
- It is important to note that regardless of acceptance, each of these books offers perspectives of a people as they become Hellenized.

The Prophet Ezekiel

The prophet Ezekiel prophesied that God would send a shepherd, a descendant of David, to guide Israel, with whom God will conclude a covenant of peace so that they will live in perfect security.

Yahweh declares that he will take vengeance on the nations who desolated Israel and Judah, not because he pities his people, but because he wants to vindicate his name, to convince them that he is supreme among all gods.

The Prophet Jeremiah

Jeremiah began his work during the reign of Josiah (626 BCE). At first he was impressed by Josiah's sweeping reforms, but became disillusioned when he determined they lacked social justice and economic equality. The Temple cult did little to improve social conditions.

For Jeremiah, Judah's failure to be faithful to Mosaic principles that protected the poor, and to get rich at their expense, including fraud and violence, compelled Yahweh to bring an end to the system. He and Baruch issued a scroll with their prophecies about Judah and Jerusalem. King Jehoiakim ordered it read in his presence. After hearing it, he had it burned, and ordered the arrest of Jeremiah and Baruch. They had already gone into hiding.

Jeremiah viewed Babylon as the Deity's chosen means to destroy Judah. His unpopularity never waned. In the most critical of times, when Nebuchadnezzar's threat was severe, Jeremiah recommended to Hezekiah that rather than resisting conquest, he should open the gates and accept subservience. At least the city would not be burned to the ground, and would give Judah a chance to regain trust in Yahweh. Hezekiah ignored the advice, resulting in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 587 BCE.

Although Jeremiah was hated, he made an important contribution to the survival of Judaism. He proclaimed that Judah's faith did not depend on outward signs of Yahweh's protection or presence. **David's throne, the holy city, Solomon's Temple, and even the nation itself could vanish, and Yahweh would maintain his relationship with those who believe in him. The faithful could worship Yahweh without a temple, anywhere in the world.**

The Prophet Isaiah

Isaiah, Micah, Zephaniah, and Nahum are prophets from the southern kingdom of Judah, and explicitly address the Assyrian menace, viewing the revived Mesopotamian power as the instrument of divine wrath. Chapters 1-39 of Isaiah would have been reflective of Israel's disloyalty towards Yahweh, and cautioned possible punishment for Judah. It is here that Judah's King Ahaz would have become subservient to the Assyrian Empire, while keeping a passive

reliance on Yahweh. Yahweh would rescue his people, and Isaiah stated that a young woman, perhaps Ahaz's wife, would bear a son named "Immanuel." By the time the boy was old enough to make wise decisions, both Syria and Israel would have collapsed, ending the threat to Judah. The son's name was Hezekiah.

King Cyrus of Persia

Our story left off at the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 587 BCE. The Israelites were deported, and the Babylonians moved in. Some Israelites fled to Egypt. Israel and Judah no longer existed.

Cyrus, the Persian King, conquered Babylon. During his reign, he decreed that the Israelites could return to their homeland (Judah) and Jerusalem. King Cyrus stipulated that if a nation is to be restored, it must have a code of law.

Regardless, Judah was not considered an independent state, but rather granted permission to be a theocracy that was subservient to Persia.

Second Isaiah emphasizes that Israel's God remains in full control of human history, directing political events to redeem his captive people. In chapters 40-55, 'second Isaiah' would have shifted focus to Babylonian captivity. Isaiah uses words of comfort and encouragement to the exiled community in Babylon, about to be released by Cyrus of Persia.

Cyrus does not 'know' Yahweh. Yet, the Persian leader is nonetheless God's instrument of change, winning a series of astonishing victories. Viewing Cyrus' triumphs as evidence of divine action, Second Isaiah declares that he is the 'shepherd' who fulfills God's purpose of restoring the Judean community and rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple.

Even though Cyrus is not of Davidic descent, Yahweh 'anoints' him as a Messiah to do his will. Yet, there is an artifact called 'the Cyrus Cylinder' in which Cyrus attributes his successes to Marduk, chief god of the Babylonian pantheon, who delivered his city to the Persians because Babylonian rulers had neglected Marduk's cult.

It is important to note that for Second Isaiah, Marduk and his divine son "Bel" and "Nebo," who were supposedly responsible for Babylonian political supremacy, are nonentities, powerless before the God of Judah (Isa. 44:6).

Third Isaiah (chapters 56-66) takes a less optimistic view. As the exiles from Babylon return, they find Judah to be a pile of rubble, and only offers poverty. Their hearts are broken, the Temple of Solomon is gone. Yet, Isaiah writes, "The spirit of the Lord Yahweh has been given to me." He then proclaims a year of favor from Yahweh and a day of vengeance on Judah's oppressors. Yahweh's covenant now embraces whole classes of people previously excluded. Yahweh will accept anyone, Gentile or Jew, who keeps his Sabbath and clings to his covenant.

Whoever rejects idols to worship Yahweh shall inherit the land and own God's holy mountain. **Isaiah asserts that the Temple is virtually irrelevant to the Deity, for whom all heaven is a throne and earth merely a footstool.** Like Jeremiah, Isaiah chastises those who defraud the poor.

The Prophet Haggai

Around 538 BCE, a remnant of the Jewish population had just returned from Babylon. They laid the foundation for a new Temple on the same site as Solomon's Temple – beginning in about 516 BCE. Economic conditions prevented them from continuing.

Haggai, the prophet, urges the governor and the High Priest to persuade the people to return to the project. The older Jews were disappointed in the modest dimensions of the new sanctuary, but Haggai promises that it will be filled with treasures flowing from Jerusalem from all nations (Haggai 2:7).

Ketuvim (The Writings)

After the Exile

- Judah was still under the control of King Cyrus the Great of Persia. In 538 BCE, Cyrus allowed the exiles to return home.
- Judah was no longer the Kingdom of Judah, but rather the Province of Judea.
- The land was restricted to the territory around Jerusalem, and was only a small subunit of the Persian Empire.
- Judea no longer had heirs to the Davidic throne.
- The Persia encouraged Judea's religious practices, and even partially subsidized the rebuilding of the Temple. Judah became a theocracy "God-ruled" society led by priests.
- Judah no longer had divinely appointed kings. They had to refocus on their religious mission and priestly heritage.
- The Books in the Ketuvim tend to focus on the postexilic priestly concerns, how to formally worship Yahweh at the rebuilt Temple.

Books

- **Psalms** – collection of hymns and other songs
- **Proverbs** – compilation of wise sayings, and largely practical and conventional wisdom
- **Job** – a philosophical exploration of Yahweh's ethical character and relationship to humanity
- **Ecclesiastes** – a sage's quest for meaning and delight in paradox
- **Ruth** – a short story about a Moabite woman's new life in Israel during the time of the Judges

- **Song of Songs** – collection of erotic love poems
- **Lamentations** – an anguished complaint about Yahweh’s destruction of his people
- **Ester** – a short story about Jewish survival in a foreign empire
- **Ezra** – an account of Ezra, the priest-scribe who brought Torah from Babylon to recreate the covenant community in postexilic Jerusalem
- **Nehemiah** – narrative about rebuilding Jerusalem’s fortifications under Persia’s sponsorship
- **Daniel** – apocalypse, or revelation, that includes mystical visions of events leading to the End time
- **1 and 2 Chronicles** – a priestly revision of the Deuteronomic History, emphasizing Temple cult

Wisdom Literature

- There were three callings that allowed a person to speak with authority: priest, prophet, and sage
 - Priest – instruct others pertaining with covenant law.
 - Prophet – to convey Yahweh’s word
 - Sage – to provide ‘wise’ advice
- The wise often held positions of public respect and served as counselors to kings.
- The prophets were sometimes critical of sages, but wisdom ultimately outlasted the line of prophets.
- The ‘wisdom tradition’ existed long before Israel came into existence. Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Phoenicia had writings on the ‘good life.’
- The Hebrew writers added another dimension to wisdom literature: “The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge.” Wisdom, rather than Torah, was envisioned as Yahweh’s first creation, and was personified as a **gracious divine woman** who acted between the Deity and humanity.
- Although King Solomon was unlikely to be the sole author of the work, “Wisdom of Solomon,” he nevertheless was instrumental in its development and growth. Therefore, much of the writing is attributed to him.
- What separates the wisdom of Israel from that of others is that true wisdom promotes loyalty to Yahweh and sensitivity to divine will. The wise person harmonizes his/her behavior with Yahweh’s will. At this time, wisdom included the ideas that the righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished. Being wise ensured a long and prosperous life.
- In Proverbs, Wisdom is personified as a noble woman who seeks to save young men from their own inexperience and bad judgment.

- In Proverbs, chapter 8, “Yahweh created me when his purpose first unfolded, before the oldest of his works. From everlasting I was firmly set, from the beginning, before earth came into being.”
- This passage shows Yahweh creating the world with Wisdom, a joyous feminine companion at his side.
- Philo Judaeus (first century CE), tried to reconcile Greek philosophy with Hebrew revelation, including his doctrine of *Logos (Word)*, by which God created the universe. (Logos is a masculine term in Greek and became more acceptable to the Hebrew patriarchal thinking than *Sophia (Wisdom – feminine)*). Nevertheless, it is assumed that a divine mediator stands between God and the world.

Satan and the Hebrew Bible

- It was accepted that Yahweh had a heavenly court consisting of divine beings. “The Satan” was included, and served as the Deity’s prosecuting attorney. The Satan is not God’s adversary, but his servant, a celestial functionary whose task is to seek out and expose any disloyalty in God’s human subjects.
- Scholars believe that the concept of satan developed from the negative qualities once attributed to God. Satan is the ‘dark side’ of Yahweh’s ethically ambivalent character. In early stages, all things good and evil originated with Yahweh.
- In later developments, Israel’s thinkers placed the source of human trouble not in Yahweh alone, but among the “sons of the gods,” the heavenly court.
- Satan is separated from Yahweh himself, but remains completely under God’s control, doing nothing without permission.

Zoroastrianism

- After the Babylonian exile, new religious ideas infiltrated Jewish thinking. Zoroastrianism, the official Persian religion, viewed the universe as dualistic, ruled by two opposing forces of good and evil. The powers of light were led by Ahura Mazda, while those of darkness were directed by Ahriman, the Zoroastrian devil. According to Zoroaster, a cosmic battle between good and evil will occur at the end time, and Ahura Mazda will defeat Ahriman. Until then, humans will constantly struggle between peace and destruction.
- Zoroastrianism influenced Judaism-Christianity ideas about Satan, who ultimately became the enemy of humans and God, as well. By New Testament times, Persian, Greek, Syrian, and other non-Jewish ideas had been assimilated into the religion of Yahweh.

Afterlife

- In contrast to the Egyptians, who went to great lengths to preserve their dead in hope of future life, the ancient Israelites did not embrace a doctrine of life after death. The covenant people's relationship with Yahweh did not extend beyond the grave. Instead of heaven, Yahweh's worshipers anticipated endless confinement to Sheol, a dark subterranean abyss that indiscriminately housed all the dead, good and evil alike.
- Death breaks the bond between God and humanity. Those who go down to the Pit do not go on trusting your faithfulness (Is 38).
- Postexilic leaders in Judea may have emphasized a negative view of afterlife to discourage older folk beliefs about the dead, beliefs Israelites once shared with their Canaanite neighbors. Many ancient societies assumed that the dead not only continued to exist in another dimension but also could communicate with the living, helping relatives or harming enemies.
- "Sheol" is thought to come from the verb "to ask" perhaps a reference to the ancient and widespread practice of inquiring of the dead. Deuteronomy prohibits this practice.
- It was not until Daniel was written during the second century BCE that a biblical author unambiguously promised the faithful a future life. For Daniel, postmortem existence takes the form of a resurrected body, in which the just will awake to everlasting life, while the covenant-breakers will experience shame and everlasting disgrace.
- The most optimistic vision of the afterlife comes in Wisdom of Solomon (first century BCE). Greek ideas (Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato) rejected concepts of a soul's fate in Sheol, declaring that "God did make humans imperishable, he made them in the image of his own nature." Offering a solution to the problem of undeserved suffering, the author states that God's faithful servants, no matter how unjustly afflicted, will be compensated in the next world.

Song of Songs

Song of Songs is a celebration of sexual passion and has been classified three ways:

- Allegory of Yahweh's love for Israel
- Allegory of Christ's love for his bride, the Church
- Simply a collection of love lyrics – affirming human's capacity for sexual pleasure

Between the Testaments

- The Persian Empire lasted from 539 BCE to 330 BCE. The Judeans had about 200 years of political stability.
- "Blazing across the eastern Mediterranean region like a brilliant comet," Alexander the Great (356 BCE – 323 BCE) conquered the Persian Empire, creating the largest empire the world had ever known.

- Conquests brought the Greek language, art, literature, philosophy, and social customs to the lands he conquered.
- For the first time in history, a European power dominated – militarily, politically, and culturally – the Near Eastern and Indian civilizations.
- The goal of Alexander the Great was to create a world government that was unified by Greek culture, but he died at age 32 in Babylon of a sudden fever.
- The Empire slowly disintegrated after that, but large sections remained under control of his successors (Ptolemy I – Egypt, and Seleucus – Syria (including Turkey and Iraq)).
- The Ptolemaic dynasty with its capital in Alexandria controlled Judea until 199 BCE – when it was taken over by the Syrians.
- The Judeans were faced with navigating a much larger, more complex world. Throughout Alexander’s Hellenistic influence, people began to regard themselves as citizens of a world (cosmos) rather than a city-state. This *cosmopolitan* outlook allowed integration of Greek with many other ethnic customs, including Judaism.
- When we look at the deuterocanonical books, we see different perspectives of how Hellenization looked. For some, Hellenism and Judaism peacefully coexisted.
- In the Book of Maccabees (the faithful ones), some felt that Hellenism was an assault on Judaism, and Antiochus was determined to eradicate Judaism. To crush opposition to state-imposed assimilation, Antiochus would ‘punish’ Jews who remained faithful to Torah and Yahweh through imprisonment, torture, and death.
- Antiochus burns copies of Torah and forbids offering sacrifices to any gods other than Hellenistic gods. He outlawed circumcision and keeping the Sabbath. He builds a citadel in Jerusalem and fills it with Seleucid (Syrian) soldiers. Finally, he builds an altar to Zeus in Yahweh’s Temple, and sacrifices pigs and other ritually unclean animals in the sanctuary.
- The Book of Daniel considered this the ‘great tribulation,’ as it resulted in saints and martyrs – the first heroes of their time. At the same time, fear of Antiochus’ military might, many Jews abandoned Judaism and sacrificed to the state-imposed gods.
- The Book 1 Maccabees covers the time between 168 BCE – 134 BCE, when Jews overthrew their Greek-Syrian overlords and established an independent state.
- A priest named Matthias had a large following of ‘faithful’ Jews, unwilling to succumb to Antiochus’ threats and punishment. After Seleucid soldiers massacred 1000 Jews who refused to defend themselves on the Sabbath, Matthias and his followers decided that self-defense does not violate Sabbath rules. As a result, they fought a guerrilla war against the troops, destroyed many Greek altars, and circumcised Jewish boys.
- Near his death, Matthias commissioned his son Judas Maccabee (“the hammer”) as his successor.

- Against all odds, Judas Maccabee defeats the Seleucid army, cleanses the Temple, and rebuilds its altar, and holds a festival of rededication (*Hanukkah*). He proceeds to establish a treaty with Rome, the mighty new Empire rising in the West.
- 1 Maccabees portrays Rome as the champion of integrity and political integrity, and the protector of small states who willingly place themselves into their sphere of influence.
- In 160 BCE, Judas Maccabee dies in battle, and his brother Jonathan succeeds him, and rules until 142 BCE. The new Seleucid (Syrian) King Alexander makes a peace treaty with Jonathan, and in 152 BCE, appoints him High Priest (a political and religious office) – establishing a new line called the *Hasmonean* – line of priest-kings that lasted until 40 BCE.
- In 142 BCE, Jonathan is lured into a Seleucid camp and murdered. His brother, Simon becomes the successor. Simon fights a few battles, and ultimately bribes Syrian troops to withdraw, ensuring peace for about 7 years. In those 7 years, Simon builds fortresses, forms an alliance with the Syrian king, and has the Israelites released from taxation and tribute.
- In 134 BCE, the Seleucids again attack, but are fended off.
- In 63 BCE, Syria and Palestine were absorbed into the Roman Empire by Julius Caesar.
- In 40 BCE, Rome appoints Herod to be King of the Jews. Herod was an extensive and elaborate builder, transforming Jerusalem into a Roman Empire showpiece. His most famous project was the reconstruction of the Jerusalem Temple, which was finally completed in the late 60s CE. Herod died in 4 BCE.
- Herod's second son, Herod Antipas (4 BCE – 39 CE) ruled over Galilee and Perea.
- Herod's third son, Herod Philip II (4 BCE – 39 CE) ruled over northeastern Galilee.
- Here lies the world of the New Testament.