

SECTIONS AND READINGS FOR TRAIL VII

Section VII.1 Daniel 1:1-2:49	Section VII.29 Isaiah 54:1-55:13
Section VII.2 Daniel 3:1-4:37	Section VII.30 Isaiah 56:1-58:14
Section VII.3 Ezekiel 1:1-3:31	Section VII.31 Isaiah 59:1-60:22
Section VII.4 Ezekiel 3:22-5:17	Section VII.32 Isaiah 61:1-63:6
Section VII.5 Ezekiel 6:1-7:27	Section VII.33 Isaiah 63:7-64:12
Section VII.6 Ezekiel 8:1-11:25	Section VII.34 Isaiah 65:1-25
Section VII.7 Ezekiel 12:1-14:11	Section VII.35 Isaiah 66:1-24
Section VII.8 Ezekiel 14:12-16:63	Section VII.36 Daniel 7:1-8:27
Section VII.9 Ezekiel 17:1-19:14	Section VII.37 Daniel 5:1-6:28
Section VII.10 Ezekiel 19:1-22:16	Section VII.38 Daniel 9:1-27
Section VII.11 Ezekiel 22:17-24:27	Section VII.39 Daniel 10:1-12:13
Section VII.12 Ezekiel 25:1-32:32	Section VII.40 Psalms 46-48; 76 & 87
Section VII.13 Ezekiel 33:1-34:31	Section VII.41 Psalms 89; 74; 79 & 13
Section VII.14 Obadiah 1-21 & Ezekiel 35:1-36:38	Section VII.42 Psalms 106 & 102
Section VII.15 Ezekiel 37:1-39:29	Section VII.43 Ezra 1:1-2:70 & Nehemiah 7:5-73a
Section VII.16 Ezekiel 40:1-43:27	Section VII.44 Ezra 3:1-45 & 4:24-6:22
Section VII.17 Ezekiel 44:1-46:24	Section VII.45 Haggai 1:1-2:23
Section VII.18 Ezekiel 47:1-48:35	Section VII.46 Zechariah 1:1-6:15
Section VII.19 Psalm 137 & Lamentations 1:1-22	Section VII.47 Zechariah 7:1-11:17
Section VII.20 Lamentations 2:1-3:66	Section VII.48 Zechariah 12:1-14:21
Section VII.21 Lamentations 4:1-5:22	Section VII.49 Esther 1:1-6:14
Section VII.22 Isaiah 40:1-41:29	Section VII.50 Esther 7:1-10:3
Section VII.23 Isaiah 42:1-43:13	Section VII.51 Malachi 1:1-4:6
Section VII.24 Isaiah 43:13-45:8	Section VII.52 Ezra 4:6-23 & 7:12-10:44
Section VII.25 Isaiah 45:9-47:15	Section VII.53 Nehemiah 1:1-3:32
Section VII.26 Isaiah 48:1-50:3	Section VII.54 Nehemiah 4:1-6:19
Section VII.27 Isaiah 50:4-52:12	Section VII.55 Nehemiah 7:1-4, 73b-10:39
Section VII.28 Isaiah 52:13-53:12	Section VII.56 Nehemiah 11:1-13:31

TRAIL VII: EXILE (605-538 B.C.) AND POST-EXILE (538-420 B.C.) ERA:

DANIEL; EZEKIEL; OBADIAH; LAMENTATIONS; ISAIAH 40-66; EZRA;
NEHEMIAH; HAGGAI; ZECHARIAH; ESTHER; MALACHI & 12 PSALMS.

COMPREHENSIVE QUESTION:

What should God's judgment and deliverance mean to God's people in any age? How are judgement and deliverance related in God's economy of grace? How have you witnessed this?

INTRODUCTION TO DANIEL.

Daniel himself was one of the royal or noble Jewish youths taken from Jerusalem to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar in the first wave of exile in 605 B.C. (Dn 1:1-4; 2 K 24:1f) to be trained for service in the king's palace and administration. Nothing is known of his lineage, and the only details that are known of his later life are those revealed, in passing, in this book itself. Many readers have been fascinated and inspired by Daniel's exemplary character. His contemporary Jewish leader in Babylon, the priestly prophet Ezekiel, refers to Daniel's outstanding righteousness (Ek 14:14, 20) and wisdom (Ek 28:3).

The second half of the book of Daniel is apocalyptic, that is, it purports to be a series of visions given by God through a mediator or a seer concerning future historical events. Here they present an important Old Testament theme, namely, that the kingdoms of this world will ultimately be replaced by Yahweh's own kingdom. Therefore, God's people should have hope and persevere. While other prophets had given glimpses of the future, Daniel focuses upon this theme through a number of visions and dreams throughout the book. It is a pity that a work of such grandeur has too often been trivialized, considered ridiculous or fantastic, and not been taken seriously by many later readers. Furthermore, too many of those who have valued the book have employed it as a vehicle for all sorts of futuristic speculation, mapping of the end times and even date setting. Those in Qumran who believed they were living in the end times, found this book very attractive.

While the stress is on future events throughout, the book begins with the contemporary situation: Daniel's roles in the Babylonian court dealing with Babylonian, Median and Persian kings. Yet even here there is much more focus upon a revelation of Yahweh and his universal sovereignty than about the history of Daniel's times. His recorded visions concern Babylon, Persia, Greece, kings of the north and south, rulers that make trouble for the people of God, an anointed one cut off and the cessation of sacrifices. Modern readers, even if not encouraged to try to fit all of these prophecies into exact future historical situations for Israel, can still find their themes relevant to their own current historical challenges, as God's people have done repeatedly over the centuries.

The book is included in the Writings section rather than in the Prophets section of the traditional Hebrew Bible, even though it is included in the Prophets section of the 3rd century B.C. LXX Greek translation and considered a prophetic book by the Jews of Qumran and by Jesus, according to Mt 24:15. No date for a biblical book's writing has been more positively asserted and so bitterly denied than this one. Traditionally it was accepted as written by Daniel himself toward the end of the sixth century B.C., yet because of the amazing accuracy of its detailed prophecies concerning the Persians and Greeks, a large number of modern biblical scholars contend that it must have been written as late as the mid second-century B.C., after the events it purports to foretell. The dating as well as the detailed outline of the book is complicated by the fact that its mid-section, 2:4b to 7:28, is written in Aramaic rather than in Hebrew. The character of both its languages are, however, closer to that of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah and the exilic prophets than to that of 2nd century Jewish literature. Furthermore, the 3rd century LXX translation includes additional material not found in any Hebrew text of Daniel, even in the eight Daniel manuscripts of Qumran, namely, the Prayer of Azariah, the Song of the Three Young Men, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon. Other Aramaic non-biblical documents from Qumran mentioning Daniel, especially in relation to apocalyptic visions, indicate that from 2nd century B.C. through the 1st century A. D. many traditions about Daniel were circulating in Palestine. None of these, however, were selected the by early Jewish leaders to be included in their Hebrew Bible.

ANALYSIS OF DANIEL

1-6 Third person stories of Daniel and the kings of Babylon and Persia.

7-12 First person dreams and visions of Daniel.

1. For the young Hebrews, what is the issue about their diet in Babylon (Lv 11)? What light does Daniel's actions throw upon how God's people are to be "in the world, but not of it" (On 17:11, 15-16)? Does this suggest that all God's people should be vegetarians? Why? How might this relate to how Jesus and the early church dealt with Jewish and Greco-Roman food issues (Mt 15:11; Mk 7:15-23; Ac 10:11-15; 11:6-9; 15:29; 1 Co 8:1-13; 10:14-33; Ro 14:1-23; Cl 2:16f; 1 Ti 4:3-5; Tt 1:15)? How relevant is this to you today?
2. How did Daniel and his friends handle the religious conflict with those in authority over them? Why do you think that they didn't object to being given Babylonian names, even one's incorporating or alluding to the names of Babylonian deities like Bel and Nabu/Nebo? Were they, thus, compromising with paganism? How so? What can you learn from their behaviour about how to deal with those in authority over you? How do you see these authorities related to God's authority (Ac 4:18-20; 5:27-33; 23:1-5; Ro 13:1-7; 1 P 2:13-17)? Would you dare to stand alone like Daniel and his companions?
3. How do Daniel and the king and his advisors differ in their understanding of the relationship between special gifts, the giver and the gifted persons? How does Daniel understand and employ his special gifts? What does this teach us about our gifts as Christians for serving/ ministering in God's kingdom today (1 Co 3:9 12:4-7; 2 Co 6:1; 1 P 4:10f)?
4. What do the prayers of ch. 2 teach you about (a) the importance of prayer in your particular ministries, (b) the value of prayer support groups for ministers/ servants of God and (c) the roles of prayers of adoration and thanksgiving? How can you apply this in your regular prayer life?
5. What do you make of Daniel's interpretation of the king's dream about the future and the end of the age? What does the dream mean for us over two and a half millennia later? How does it seem to you to relate to Dn 7:13f & 27 and to Rv 11:15, 12:1f?

1. In light of Nebuchadnezzar's own response to Daniel's interpretation of his dream in ch. 2, and also the meaning of that dream, why do you think the king would later (a) set up such an image, (b) apparently believe the herald's hype in 3:4ff and (c) demand everyone to worship it on pain of certain death? What do you think the great image represented? Why?
2. Why might someone ever have reason to believe charges against you similar to those brought against Daniel's friends in 3:12? How would you cope with the choice between a life of compromised faith or what looked like certain death? Why? Where today are God's people faced with a similar choice? How can you support those people?
3. How do the three Hebrew's view of what their God can and will do compare to the king's view on gods' abilities and willingness to act (2:47; 3:15-18)? How does your concept of Yahweh God compare with both of these views? Was their faith faltering in 3:18 (He 11:6; Ja 1:6-8)? How deep was their trust in Yahweh (He 11:34; Jb 2:9f; 13:15; Ps 73:23-28; Hb 3:17-19; Lk 22:42)? Whom do you think the king saw joining them in the furnace?
4. How significant is the occasion of the fulfillment of the warning in the king's dream (4:30f)? How might the king have avoided the hard lessons of his experience (4:37)? How well can you identify with him? How far have you come in learning his basic lesson (Ro 13:1; Pr 3:34; 1 P 5:5f; Ja 4:6, 10)? What further experiences might you need to learn that lesson?
5. Which came first, Nebuchadnezzar's communication to his entire realm about the Most High God (4:13, 37) or his dream and subsequent experience (4:4-36)? Why? What were the stages in chs.1-4 in the king's progress in coming to a clearer understanding of Daniel's God's nature and character? What contributed most to his progress in understanding? What contributes most to your progress in understanding God and his ways with and for humanity? What more progress do you think you need to make here? How might the king have considered even his most recent experience to be one of God's great and signs and mighty wonders? What might this indicate about what should count as a divine sign or wonder in your experience?

INTRODUCTION TO EZEKIEL.

Ezekiel was a prophet from a priestly family who seems to have been deported to Babylon with king Jehoiakim in the second wave of exiles from Judah in 597 B.C. He prophesied from 592 to at least 571 B.C. as a contemporary of Daniel (14:14, 20). The destruction of Jerusalem (587 B.C.) divides his ministry into two distinct periods. Before this event he had the painful task of disillusioning his fellow exiles in Babylon, although some scholars see this ministry in Palestine. All hopes of an early deliverance of the city and a speedy return from exile were in vain, for Jerusalem must fall. Thereafter, as pastor to the Jews in exile, he sought to counter despair and to offer comfort and hope through promises of future deliverance and restoration. Chs 25-32 separate these two phases of ministry with a series of oracles against seven nations, much like those of Isaiah and Jeremiah. Ezekiel's whole life was dominated by his sense of vocation and responsibility as Yahweh's messenger to his fellow Jews.

As a new prophet for a new age, he helped to introduce a new age of Hebrew prophecy. Along with Daniel, Ezekiel made use of strange visions and figures that were to characterize Hebrew apocalyptic literature for centuries. He mixed them in with many of the communication devices of the earlier prophets, including oracles, symbolic prophetic actions and allegories. More than any other Old Testament prophet he was influenced by priestly symbolism. His prophetic words and deeds seem to have been presented on very specific dates, and only later written down and collected together. The dates, however, other than those in the oracles to the nations section, form a coherent chronological series marking major developments in his ministry.

Later Jews did not question the inspiration of Ezekiel's prophecy, but they felt that it could be a dangerous book for uneducated Jews, because in so many ways it seemed to differ from the law of Moses as they understood it. Certainly, even today, many of the meanings of Ezekiel's prophetic visions seem to remain hidden even to biblical scholars.

ANALYSIS OF EZEKIEL,

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| 1-24 | Prophecies before the fall of Jerusalem (587 B.C.) |
| 25-32 | Oracles against seven nations. |
| 33-39 | Prophecies after the fall of Jerusalem. |
| 40-48 | Later visions of the ideal state of Israel and the temple of Yahweh. |

1. How does Ezekiel's first vision(s) of God represent the glory of Yahweh (3:23)? How are the 4 figures "living creatures/ beings" (or "cherubim" in chs. 10f) related to the "figure with the appearance of a man" (1:26)? What does Ezekiel's detailed description suggest about Yahweh's (a) nature, (b) character and (c) relationship to nature and humanity?
2. How does Ezekiel respond to his visions of Yahweh? How might you respond? How did these visions mould his ministry? How might such visions shape your specific ministry? Would you welcome such a vision of Yahweh?
3. Given that the phrase "son of man" ["ben-adam"] is a common Hebrew idiom for an individual human being (e.g. Ps 8:4; Hb 2:6), why do you think Yahweh regularly addresses Ezekiel as "son of man"? Why might Daniel also once be addressed the same way (Dn 8:17)? What might have motivated Jesus to prefer to employ a phrase like "the son of man" with such a common connotation as his usual self-designation according to all four Gospels? However, how much does this phrase take on a new and special connotation in the description of the mysterious figure approaching the Ancient of Days in Daniel's vision in Dn 7:13? What more than usual, therefore, does Jesus seem to imply about his identity by deliberately quoting just this very Daniel passage at the conclusion of his Jewish trial (Mt 26:64; Mk 14:62; Lk 22:69)? What do his Jewish judges, therefore, take him then to be claiming? Does Jesus agree with their interpretation? Why would this connotation and designation, rather than that of his usual self-designation, be considered serious blasphemy? What, then, does the designation "one like a son of man" in the visions Rv 1:13-16 and 14:14 suggest to you?
4. How would you describe the terms of Ezekiel's call (Ek 1:3; 2:1-15) with respect to (a) who he is, (b) the people to whom he is sent, (c) what his message is to be, (d) where he will get his words from, (e) what results he should expect and (f) what encouragement and advice he needs and receives? How much of this applies to those who serve/ minister for the same God today?
5. What light does 3:17-21 throw for you upon (a) who is responsible for human sinning, (b) what is the root of sinning, (c) what is sinning's punishment, (d) who is responsible for confronting people with their sinning, (e) what are the consequences of shirking this responsibility, and (f) what are the possibility of one's good works atoning for one's sinning? How does this apply to your relationships with others?

1. Why do you think that Yahweh keeps on telling Ezekiel to stand on his feet after he has fallen on his face in awe of Yahweh's self-revelation (1:28-2:1; 3:23f)? What enabled him to stand in Yahweh's presence (2:2; 3:12, 14,24)? How do you explain Ezekiel's response to God's strong hand upon him (3:14f, 22) in spite of his extraordinary vision and calling? How might you respond to Yahweh's hand upon you? In what ways have you experienced God's presence? How did it affect you? Have you felt enabled? How so?
2. What many restrictions does Yahweh place upon his prophet's life for a period? Why does he do this? To what extent do you appreciate the restrictions God may place upon your life for witness and ministry as a Christian? What can you learn from Ezekiel's complaint (4:14) and from Yahweh's response to it? How might Yahweh accommodate himself to you and your fellow Christians today?
3. How would you describe Ezekiel's non-verbal communication of his message? What was the message? To whom? How effective might this communication be? What equivalent communication media are available in your culture today? Who might you target? With what messages? How close is the connection between medium and message for (a) God, (b) for God's people and (c) for your society? Can the medium really be the message for God? How so?
4. What was Ezekiel's basic message to the people of God still remaining in Jerusalem? How receptive would those people be, who had welcomed the contemporary prophet Hananiah's predictions of immanent rescue from Babylon's heavy yoke (Jr 28:1-14)? Would you be willing to carry a similar counter message from God to his people today? What sort of message might be needed today? What sort of reception might you anticipate? How might you respond to that reception?
5. What do you think was Yahweh's purpose (Dt 4:5-9) in setting Jerusalem "at the centre of the nations" (5:5)? How had Judah and Jerusalem subverted God's purpose so far (Ek 5:6f)? What, therefore, was Yahweh's response (5:8-12)? What was he trying to accomplish (5:13-15)? Do you think he has succeeded yet? What further purposes has Yahweh for his chosen city Jerusalem? Is Jerusalem's geographic location indeed still "at the centre of the nations" today?

1. What do you make of Yahweh's anger, wrath and hurt (5:13; 6:9) as expressed here and in his forthcoming historical judgments? How important is it to recognise that Yahweh can have feelings? Were these particular feelings justified? Why? Could Yahweh again have cause to be so angry with his people? When?
2. What is so wrong with idolatry it offends and hurts Yahweh so much that he even hates it (6:9)? Does idolatry really exist today? What forms does it take? Would they be any less hateful to Yahweh? Why?
3. What seems to be the commonest name/ title for God employed by Ezekiel both in his communication with Yahweh and in the presentation of Yahweh's messages? How does this name connect to Ezekiel's main themes thus far? How is also related to the common refrain "that you/ they may know that I am Yahweh"? What titles/ names do you primarily use to talk to God and talk about him to others? Why?
4. What alone will ultimately enable God's people to really know (a) that he, Yahweh, has spoken (5:13; 7:10), (b) that he is Yahweh (6:7, 10, 13f; 7:4, 27) and (c) that he is active in their history (7:9), in spite of their unwillingness to listen to him and his prophet(s) (3:7, 27)? How often do God's people and others today have to learn the hard way really to hear these basic messages? Has this even been true of you sometimes? When? Why? How is this also relevant to all humanity (Ro 1:18-32)?
5. What do the prophecies of chs. 6 and 7 teach about (a) the nature, (b) means, (c) agents, (d) motives, (e) standards, (f) purposes and (g) passions of Yahweh's judgement of sinners? Does this apply equally to nations/ peoples and to individuals? How do you apply this to your life?
6. How helpful are wealth or eminence in dealing with Yahweh's judgement (7:11-13, 19-21; Mk 10:21-31)? What can you and God's people today learn from this?

1. How many qualifying words does Ezekiel use in describing his vision in chs. 8 and 10? How does this differ from the description of his vision in ch 1? At what points especially does he resort to using these qualifiers? Why do you think that is? What lessons can readers draw from this?
2. Why do you think Ezekiel needed to be wrenched abruptly away by his hair while being consulted by the Jewish elders in his Babylonian home (8:1f; 12:1)? What was it that was so important for him to witness happening in God's holy city, in Jerusalem? How does each type of abomination fit the particular socio-economic class of people that practice it? How about today? What do you think Yahweh thinks of each modern idolatry? Do they involve you and the people you know? How do they infect the people of God today as well as contemporary culture?
3. How are the gross practices of idolatry related to Yahweh's abandonment of his people, land and sanctuary (8:6, 12,16, 18; 9:3,9; 10:4, 18f; 11:22f)? Could the feeling of apparent abandonment by Yahweh that many people today seem to feel – e.g., "God is dead" – be linked as well to some kinds of modern idolatry? How so?
4. How is Yahweh's firm commitment to pitiless judgement in 8:18 related to the events of chs. 9 and 10? How does this illuminate the nature of Yahweh's justice? Was Ezekiel really the only one to be left (9:8; 11:13)? Why might he have felt so? Was he, therefore, in good company (1K 19:10, 14, 18)? Who, however, were to be spared? For what purpose (12:16, 20)? How might this be relevant to you and God's people today?
5. In your own words, what were Yahweh's intentions for the Jews through the exile according to 11:16-21? What all would change for the Jews? How would that be possible? What similar changes do the people of God today need? How also could that be possible? How well does Ezekiel agree with his older contemporary, Jeremiah, here (Jr 24:7; 31:33; 32:38f; Ek 11:19; 18:31; 36:26f)? Wherein lays your own hope in the present time of apparent divine abandonment? Why is that?

1. What indications in ch. 12 could some biblical scholars point to as evidence that Ezekiel was really prophesying for the whole of this early period of his ministry in Judah rather than in Babylon? Do you think the evidence is clear enough to draw their conclusion? What difference would it make to understanding his prophecies if he were working in one location rather than the other?
2. What message was Ezekiel's dramatic prophecy 12:1-7 meant to convey? How effective was its divinely-chosen means of communication? How much more effective could messages to God's people be today, if creative drama was employed more often? How well could the sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist/ Holy Communion/ the Lord's Supper be considered as divinely-chosen dramatic means of communication? What divine messages might they, then, be meant to convey? How well are these messages communicated by the ways these sacraments are usually celebrated in your Christian congregation? How might these same messages be communicated even more clearly by adjusting the details of their dramatic presentation? Who, however, is authorized to make such adjustments in your Christian community? Why might that be so?
3. What convictions of the Israelites are presented in 12:22 and 27? What was Yahweh's response? How exactly was Ezekiel's dramatic prophecy of ch. 12 fulfilled according to the account in 2 K 25:1-7? When did this happen (33:21)? What does this imply about the attitude of many present-day Christians, who pay little attention to fellow Christians who are concerned about the apparently increasing signs of the Messiah's return and the coming day of Yahweh's judgement (2 P 3:3-13)?
4. How are false prophets and their prophecies described in chs. 12 & 13? What motivated them? What was their basic message (Jr 8:11; 14:13)? How would you assess the situation among God's people today? How does God Himself deal with such prophets and prophecies then and now?
5. Who were seeking to consult Yahweh through his prophet Ezekiel in 12:1-11? How much better was their inner spirituality than that of the elders of the "rotten fig"—Jews still in Judah (Jr 24:5-10), whom Ezekiel had recently been forced to observe worshiping in Jerusalem's temple (Ek 10:8-12)? Why does God question even their right to consult him? Nevertheless, what are Yahweh's messages to them? How would you put these messages in your own words? Furthermore, what personal dangers is the prophet, who is consulted in such circumstances, warned about? Why do you think that is so? What might all of this mean to you with respect to presenting (a) your personal supplications and (b) your intercessions and replies for some people who enquire of God through you? What questions does this difficult passage raise for you?

1. How does Ek 14:12-23 indicate why there can't always be a positive answer to Abraham's great question, "Won't the presence of righteous people save a sinful nation from destruction" (Gn 18:23-26)? On what grounds are some unrighteous people to be spared Jerusalem's destruction (9:4-6; 12:16; 14:22f; 16:61-63)? What aspect of the survivors' conduct and actions, good or bad, might console Ezekiel about what Yahweh has done (14:22f)? What grounds for judgement does the New Testament give in 2 Co 5:10? How does this fit with the Protestant Reformation's cornerstone doctrine of "salvation by grace through faith alone" (Ep 2:8-10; Rv 20:11-15)?
2. Why might the references to the three great righteous men in Ek 14:14, 20 (28:3) help in the relative dating of several other biblical books? Which ones?
3. How does Yahweh's revelation through Ezekiel in ch. 15, (17:5-10; 19:10-14), employ and contribute to the proud traditional Jewish view of themselves as Yahweh's choice vine/ vineyard (Ho 10:1; Is 5:1-7; Jr 2:21; 12:10; Ps 80:8-16)? How does this help you appreciate Jesus' use of the same metaphor in Mt 21:53; Mk 12:1-9; Lk 20:9-16 and in 15:1-10?
4. Why do you think the Israelites' faithlessness to Yahweh is compared so frequently by his prophets to the behaviour of adulterers or prostitutes? Why, at this particular time, would Ezekiel be driven to expand this metaphor into an allegory with such vivid descriptions and passionate pleas (ch. 16)? How much do Yahweh's feelings seem to be shared by Ezekiel? Can you feel the pain of Yahweh over Israel's pride, thanklessness, misuse of gifts, betrayal and wicked perversions? Nevertheless, what does Yahweh promise eventually to do with and for Jerusalem (16:60-63)? To what degree can you also identify with the inhabitants of Jerusalem? How important might it be for you also to remember your first encounter with God, when he claimed you for his own and committed himself to you (16:8,43)? How would you describe the state of your present relationship to God? How relevant is Yahweh's continuing and renewed commitment to you too (Mt 18:20; 28:20; He 13:5)?
5. What details of this extended analogy throw light on Hebrew life and customs? What particular sins are highlighted? Was Yahweh's anger justified? Does his promised punishment fit their crime (16:38-42)? Why is Jerusalem's ancestry dragged in (16:3, 45-52)? How could she be worse than notorious Sodom (Mt 10:14f; 11:23f)? According to 16:49f, what were Sodom's great sins? How does this compare with Sodom's ancient sinful reputation (Gn 19)? How much had Jerusalem learned from the downfalls of Sodom and Samaria (16:50)? Do you think the Jewish attitude to Samaria persisted into Jesus' day (Jn 4:9, 19f)? How about unto today?

1. How do Ezekiel's allegory/ parable/ riddle and its interpretation in ch.17 expose the basic sinfulness of king Zedekiah's rebellion against Babylon in 588 B.C. (2 K 24:20; 2 Ch 36:13)? How well do you honour the covenant commitments that you have made to others before God? Why? Why do you think Yahweh takes covenants so seriously? In what sense are they God's covenants too? Does this apply to marriage covenants made before God? What does that mean to you and your family?
2. How does 17:22-24 develop the covenantal theme of 16:60-63 using the same allegory (17:1f)? How is Yahweh's own covenant-making different from those of his people, even when he is involved as the senior third party in their covenants? What does this indicate about Yahweh's character?
3. What does 18:1-20 reveal about Yahweh's character, principles and motives in dealing with human wickedness and righteousness (Jr 31:29f; Ex 34:61; Dt 24:16; 2 K 14:6; 2 Ch 25:4)? How relevant for Christians today are the details here of practical justice and injustice and of righteousness and unrighteousness?
4. What difference can turning one's life around, either positively or negatively, make in one's relationship with Yahweh (18:21-28)? Can sinners do this merely by their own efforts (18:31; Is 1:16f; 55:6-8; Jr 13:23; Ek 11:19; 36:26f)? What is the normal Christian transformation process (Ro 12:2; Ep 4:22-24; Cl 2:12f; 3:1-27; Tt 3:5; 1 P 1:3)? How important is this to your developing relationship with God? What common human view of "natural" justice would give rise to the complaints of 18:25 and 29 (Dn 5:27)? In contrast, what is Yahweh's view of sin's seriousness and his way of dealing with it (18:23, 32; 33:11; Ro 6:23)? •
5. In ch. 19's song of lamentation/ elegy, who are the three princes [lion cubs & branches] of Judah and their two queen mothers [lioness and vine)? What reference is there to a fourth prince/ king of Judah? How was he related to the other kings and queens? How does what is said here fit with the historical accounts of their reigns in 2 K 23:31-25:17? How do the two queen mothers compare? Why might they be celebrated here by the prophet more than their royal progeny? How might you lament your former leaders and their mothers? Why do you think royal mothers of the perennial Davidic dynasty were so important throughout the Kingdom of Judah?

1. In ch. 20's review of Israel's past and future from Yahweh's point of view, what is revealed about (a) Yahweh's character, (b) his motives for acting or not acting, (c) what he wants his people to come to know, experience and become and (d) how he intends to teach these things? Why, therefore, should God's people not have been surprised at the exile (20:23f; Lv 26:33; Dt 4:27; 28:64)? How much of this applies to your own past and future?
2. In so far as you know it today, would you describe the land of Israel-Palestine as "the glory of all lands" (20:6, 15) or as "flowing with milk and honey" (20:6, 15; Lv 20:24; Dt 7:7f; 11:8-15)? What has happened to it (Lv 26:1-35; Dt 11:16f; 28:15, 22-24; Ek 33:28f)? Could it regain that glory again (Jl 3:18; Ek 36:33-36)?
3. Do 20:11-13 and 21, quoting Lv 18:5, imply that a person can really be saved simply by keeping God's laws (Lk 10:25-28; Ro 10:5; He 9:29)? What else might it mean (Ro 3:9-24; 9:30-10:13; Ga 2:16, 21; 3:11f; Ep 2:8-10)? How important are God's laws for Christians (Ro 13:8-14; Ga 5:13f; Ep 2:10)?
4. What parables (20:49) does Yahweh give to Ezekiel in 20:45-21:27 to describe his impending judgement of Judah and Jerusalem? What will be the agent of God's judgement (Jr 25:8f)? How devastating will it be this time? Who will be affected? Why? Is this, however, to be the final end of the great kingdom God promised (21:27)? How so (34:23f; 37:24f; Gn 49:10; 2 S 7:9, 16)?
5. What are the multiple sins for which Jerusalem is being judged so severely (22:1-16)? Which of them seem prominent in your own society? Which even characterize Christians and their congregations? What do you think God feels about all that? Who, like Ezekiel and his many predecessors (2 Ch 36:15f), are warning your society and God's people of the inevitable consequences of such sins? To what avail?

1. Are the corresponding segments of your own society alloyed in similar ways by sin as the various classes of Jerusalemites were in theirs (22:17-31)? How so? Do they also need to be refined by the fire of Yahweh's wrath (22:19; Zc 13:9; Mt 3:1-4)? In so far as God's judgement on his people is a smelting (22:21), what is its primary purposes (22:22; Zc 13:9; Mt 3:1-4; 1 P 1:61f; 1 Co 3:10-17)? How applicable is this today for God's people?
2. What does 'Yahweh so sorely regret according to 22:30f? What do you think it means to "stand in the gap" (22:30)? Why weren't even faithful contemporary prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel suitable to stand in the gap (Jr 7:16; 11:14; 14:11f)? Are matters yet that bad today?
3. As time is virtually up for Jerusalem on the eve of a Babylonian siege (24:1f), how desperately does Ezekiel try to shock the city into recognizing Yahweh's view of her relationship to him in ch. 23, by greatly extending and pornographically elaborating his earlier (ch. 16) image of Jerusalem as an unfaithful wife? How clearly do the strength and nature of Yahweh's personal feelings come through? Would you answer the question Yahweh addresses to Ezekiel in 23:36, as Ezekiel does in vv. 43-45? Does Yahweh's judgement of Jerusalem (vv. 46f; 24:14) accord with this? What are his declared purposes in such a judgement (vv. 48f)? Might Yahweh be as disturbed today about his people's defilement of his sanctuaries and his Sabbaths (vv. 37-42)? Which would disturb you the most? How so?
4. When the eighteen-month siege of overcrowded Jerusalem had finally begun (24:1), how appropriate was it to recall her proud leaders' earlier cooking pot metaphor for their impregnable city (11:3), by turning its meaning back on them (24:3-13)? How would you interpret the details this dramatic poetic analogy? Who could possibly miss its import? Yet why might Yahweh have found it prudent to add an explicit prose epilogue to the poem (24:14)? How did Yahweh then dramatically escalate the media of his prophetic message of judgement on Jerusalem to the Jewish exiles (24:16-24)? Should this have prepared them for the eventual fall of Jerusalem and its temple? But would it completely (24:23; 2Ch 36:15f)? Why, then, might the usual footnote of hope not be appended to these final two prophetic warnings of Ezekiel (23:46-49; 24:13f)?
5. What did this cost Yahweh's messenger? How would you deal with the very hard words that came to Ezekiel in 24:16f? What are the greatest costs associated with your particular Christian ministry? Are they worthwhile? Why? How can a Christian's tough lifestyle be a sign of God's activity to outsiders (1 P 3:13-17; 4:16)? Why, then, do people think that the Christian life is meant to be an easy one (Mk 8:34-38)?

1. Where are the seven nations mentioned here located with respect to Judah? How do the oracles against them show (a) that the calamities befalling Jerusalem were not arbitrary, (b) that they were not evidence of Yahweh's weakness, but of his universal sovereignty (Lord GOD [Hebrew = Sovereign Yahweh]) and (c) that all his acts express his righteous character? How is Assyria an object lesson in what Yahweh can do to even a very great nation?
2. What picture is painted in the lamentation of ch. 27 of the greatness of the Phoenician maritime and mercantile island city-state of Tyre? What commodities and Services were involved in Tyre's trading relationship with Judah? What was predicted to happen to her economy? Why would that be so significant for an island- and trading-state? What grounds are there for viewing the poetic description of the very human prince/ king/ ruler/ leader of Tyre in ch. 28 as applying also to Satan himself?
3. What sins of these seven nations were denounced? How many of them were against God's people? How many were against Yahweh alone? How common are these sins today? In each nation's case, what is the relationship between what God does and what human do to accomplish God's judgment? What variety of means can God employ to accomplish his righteous purposes? How important is it for you and fellow Christians to remember this?
4. What does the title "king of kings" mean in 26:7? Does it mean the same thing in Dn 2:37; Jr 52:32; Ez 7:12 and Is 10:8? What about in 1 Ti 6:15; Rv 17:14 and 19:16 [remember that there is no distinction between capital and non-capital letters in either Hebrew or Greek biblical manuscript]? Do words and phrases in English mean exactly the same thing every time they are used? How does context help readers discern a phrase's meaning each time? How true is this generally in discerning the Bible's meaning?
5. In what is said to Sidon in 28:22f, how are Yahweh's holiness, self-glorification, judgement and becoming known connected and illustrated? In the prose of 28:24-26 what more is said on this theme? How was that particularly relevant to God's people who were currently in exile?

1. How would you paraphrase in your own words Ezekiel's description of the role of a watchman (3:16-21; 33:2-9)? Who in your Christian congregation fill this role? Should they? Who else should share this important function? Does this metaphor fit your pastor-teacher (Ep 4:11) and your view of his/ her ministry? How realistic a view is 33:30-33 of how such a ministry actually functions even today? Why might that too often be so? How can you support your congregation's watchperson's ministry (1 P 5:1-6; 1 Co 15:58)?
2. How does 33:7 support 2:3-3:11 as Yahweh's warrant for Ezekiel's frequent claim that "the word of Yahweh came to [him] saying ..." (e.g., 33:1, 23)? What warrant do prophets today have to claim to be speaking for Yahweh?
3. How does the revelation of God's righteous ways in 33:10-20 compare with that in 18:21-32? Why does this vital theme need to be underlined repeatedly both then and now? How do Yahweh's principles in judgement reveal his primary intention (33: 10-20)? What is that purpose? What does it mean to you? How does this fit with (a) Jesus' statement in Jn 8:10f and (b) Paul's in Ga 5:13 and Ep 4:8-10? Why do some people both then (33:17, 20) and now say that Yahweh's way of judging people is unjust? Should Yahweh really be judged immoral by the common human "natural" standard of justice (Dn 5:37; Is 55:6-9), for not reckoning the weight of a person's evil and good deeds on a balance scale? In what other respects might God's way of judging people be considered unjust by common human moral standards (Mt 7:11; Ep 2:8-10; 2 Ti 1:9; Tt 3:5; Rv 20:11-15)?
4. What light does 33:21-26 throw upon Yahweh's view of his people's claims that they should still be enjoying his gifts and blessings? What grounds did the people give for their claims? How have the claims been voided (Dt 30:15-18)? What further light is thrown upon Yahweh's blessings of his people in 34:25-31? How are these blessings dependent upon the state of relationship between Yahweh and his people (Ro 10:20-11:10)? How much of this is still relevant to God's church today?
5. How does Ezekiel brilliantly expand the prophetic shepherding metaphor for Yahweh's (Is 40:11; Jr 23:1; 31:10; Mi 2:13; Ps 23:1; 80:1; 100:3) and Israel's leaders' (2 S 5:2; Jr 3:15; 10:21; 12:10; Ps 78:70-72) caring for God's people throughout ch. 34? How do the contemporary Jewish leaders' shepherding practices compare to those promised under Yahweh himself and his Davidic messiah (Jr 23:4)? How truly might this critique apply to Christian leaders (1 P 5:1-4) even today? How does this passage illuminate for you what 1st century Jews might have understood to be the significance of Jesus' claim to be the Good Shepherd of God's sheep (Jn 10:1-16)? How should Yahweh's and Jesus' shepherding practices characterize the pastor-teachers (Ep 4:11) of Christian congregations? In what ways do the sheep themselves compromise to the welfare of the flock of God, then and now (1 Co 1 1:17-22, 27-34), and make shepherding very difficult? How much have you witnessed this? What can you do about this?

INTRODUCTION TO OBADIAH.

Obadiah's message is almost entirely a denunciation of the kingdom of Edom for its unbrotherly treatment of Israel, plus a prophecy of the destruction of that kingdom and people. The prophet associates Edom's fall with the day of Yahweh, and foresees both Israel's recovery of her promised possessions and the universal triumph of God's reign.

The Edomites, as the descendants of Jacob's brother, Esau (Gn 26:22-34), and the Israelites, as the descendants of Jacob/ Israel, were enemies from at least the time that the Israelites were heading for the land of Canaan under Moses' leadership (Nu 20:14-21). Many references in the historical and prophetic books of the Old Testament testify to the antipathy between the two brother-nations and to their different destinies (e.g., 2 S 8:13f; 2 K 8:20-22; 14:7; Am 1:11f; Is 34; 63:1-6; Jr 49:7-22; Ek 25:12-14; 35:1-15; MI 1:1-5).

Almost nothing, however, is known about Obadiah the author of this book. Biblical scholars don't agree upon either the date of his prophecy or the exact historical situation that may have precipitated it. Dates from 889 to 312 B.C. have been proposed. One historical situation that it fits quite well is soon after Babylon's invasion of the Levant region again in 587 B.C., for then Edom quickly submitted to Babylon and assisted her new overlord in her great destruction of Jerusalem (Ek 25:12-14; 35:10-12; Lm 4:21f; Ps 137:7). Ob 11-14 could be referring to this event (Ek 35:5). We have therefore chosen that setting for our study.

From the 4th century B.C. on the Edomites were pushed west into Judah's Negev [south] from their territory south-east of the Dead Sea, by Nabateans invading from the Arabian desert. One of the Edomites' most famous/ infamous descendants among the 1st century B.C. Idumeans [Greek for Edomites], was king Herod the Great (Mt 2:1).

ANALYSIS OF OBADIAH

- 1-14 Obadiah's vision concerning Edom:
 - 1-4 Edom's fall pronounced
 - 5-9 The completeness of the destruction
 - 10-14 The reason for the destruction: cruelty to his brother Judah
- 15-21 The Day of Yahweh:
 - 15-16 A time of judgement on all of the nations
 - 17-20 But renewal for Judah and Israel
 - 21 The kingdom of Yahweh in Zion.

1. According to Oh 1-21 and Ek 35 1-36:7: (a) what were Edom's/ Mt. Esau's crimes? (b) how well did Edom's punishment fit her crimes? (c) how was her judgement typical of Yahweh's judgement of other nations? (d) what can individual sinners learn from this (Ro 15:4; 1 Co 10:11f)? and (e) what is revealed about Yahweh's character and concerns?
2. What will be the standard of the sovereign Yahweh's judgement of nations in his great day of judgement (Ob 15f; Ek 36:19)? How does that standard relate to Jesus' interpretation (Mt 7:12) of Moses' standard (Lv 9:18)? What connection between this judgement of nations and that spoken of by Jesus in Mt 25:31-46 can you see? Why?
3. Do Ek 35:10 and 36:5, 20 indicate that Yahweh was present in a special way in Palestine, or do Ob 17 and 19-21 intimate that Mt. Zion was especially holy to him? Would this apply today? Why?
4. To what extent could the blessings promised to the Israelites in Ek 36:8-15 be interpreted correctly as a picture of the spiritual inheritance Christians shall have in union with the Christ/ Messiah of God? Which blessings do you find most attractive? Why? However, what was Paul's vision for Israel's future (Ro 10:12f; 11:1, 5f, 25-32)? Could these blessings still apply to Jews today? Would that be Jews as a people or as a nation?
5. How does Ek 36:16-38 help answer the following questions: (a) why was Judah's exile (b) why was there to be a return from that exile (c) what has all this to do with the holiness of Yahweh's name/ reputation in Israel and in the surrounding nations? (d) how will God's people gain spiritually and morally through the exile?
6. How important would the regenerating work of Yahweh's Holy Spirit be for Israel in the new exodus after the exile (36:25-23)? What important parallels are there to God's regenerating work in Christians (Jn 3:3,5; Ro 5:5; 8:1-30; 2 Co 5:17)? Does Ek 36:26 indicate that a human's heart and spirit are identical? How are God's Spirit and our human spirit related here and in Ro 8:16?

1. How much more sense does the vision of ch. 37 make to you when you know that the same Hebrew word used here [“ruach”] means both breath and spirit/ Spirit? How does this vision fit with the spiritual regeneration promised in 36:26f (11:19; 18:31)? Does the scenario in the vision suggest the possibility of a gradual regeneration reversing the process of decomposition? Does this regeneration apply to individuals as well as to the people of Israel (37:11)? To whom?
2. To what extent could Israel's original self-assessment in 37:11 apply to you own Christian congregation? What hope remains? Why (36:14-28)? What role do prophets play in this renewal/ revival/ regeneration? What role might you be able to play in the renewal of your congregation?
3. What are the main features of the messianic kingdom promised to the whole people of God in 37:15-28? To what extent are the Jewish people of God still looking for the fulfillment of this prophetic vision (Ro 11)? How are Christians as members of God's people also involved in this messianic kingdom (Rv 11:24; 20:4, 6)?
4. How does Yahweh's concern for the reunification of his people relate to Jesus' concern for the unity of his disciples/ followers in Jn 17:21? Does the unification of Jews and Gentiles in the body of Christ, the church, have anything to do with this (Ro 11:22-24; Ep 2:1-7, 9-22)?
5. In how many ways is Yahweh involved in the great battle pictured in chs. 38 and 39 (Zp 3:8; Jr 3:6; Zc 7:14)? What does that reveal about Yahweh's (a) character, (b) his goal and (c) his means? How meaningful might such a vision be to the exiles awaiting their new exodus to their own land (39:21-29)? How does this great battle relate to the two pictured in Rv 19:11-21 and 20:7-10?
6. What evidence can you find in chs. 36-39 that the one and only God, Yahweh, was revealing himself as a trinity/ tri-unity? How well do you think Ezekiel himself might be aware of this? Would you have been, if you too were living in the 6th century B.C.?

1. Try to follow Ezekiel and his guide well enough on a walking tour through the ideal temple to sketch out its basic layout. How similar was it to the now-destroyed great temple of Solomon (1 K 6-7; 2 Ch 34)? Do you think that this vision was meant to be a literal prediction of a temple someday to be built in Jerusalem? When might that be? Could it have been Herod's massive beautification of Zerubbabel's inconspicuous second temple (Mt 24:1f; Mk 13:1f; Lk 21:5f)?
2. How might Ezekiel's detailed vision of an ideal temple have encouraged the dispirited exiles in Babylon who still mourned the loss and destruction of Solomon's temple (40:4; 43:10f)? How might the next generation of Jews, who after returning from the exile sought to build a new, second temple for Yahweh in Jerusalem (Ez 3:8-13; Hg 2:2-9), have viewed the plan revealed to Ezekiel?
3. How well were the holy and the profane places, things and people kept separate? Why do you think that Ezekiel, even though he was a priest, doesn't seem to have had even a glimpse into the holiest section of the temple? How and why are all Christians more privileged than he was (He 9:6-9, 24; 10:19-22)? On what conditions can we draw near to the holy Yahweh and serve him (He 7:24f; 10:10-14; 1 P 2:5)? How well are you exercising this great privilege regularly? What more could you be doing to worship God to the full here and now (Ro 12:1f, Cl 3:1-17)?
4. What might the details and pattern of this ideal divine sanctuary suggest about (a) the character of its God, Yahweh, (b) the church of Jesus Christ as God's temple today (1 Co 3:9-17; Ep 2:19-22; 1 P 2:5) and (c) individual embodied Christian lives as suitable sanctuaries for worshiping and serving Yahweh (Jn 2:21; Ro 12:1f; 1 Co 6:19; 2 Co 6:16)?
5. How do you imagine it was like for Ezekiel to experience the glory of Yahweh filling the inner court of the temple, especially if that glory appeared the same as it had to him before in much more own spaces (Ek 1:3-28; 3:22f)? Would you have prostrated yourself, if you had been with Ezekiel? Have you ever had an experience of Yahweh's glorious presence that prompted you to fall on your face? Would you want such an awesome experience (2 Co 3:18; 12:2-10)? Why?

1. In spite of their respective past histories of service in Yahweh's worship, what can be learned from how differently God treats the Levites and the Levitical chief priests of Zadok's line (1 Ch 6:1f [who had replaced Eli's and Abiather's line (I K 2:26f) to serve in Solomon's temple throughout its long history]; 44:10-16; 48:11)?
2. What do you make of the statements in Ek 44:19 and 46:30 about physically transmitting holiness? How might this be connected with the healings of Mt 9:20-22 and Ac 19:11f)? What about the other regulations about the priest's ritual holiness/ separateness? Why was it so important that the people clearly understand the differences between ritual holiness/ cleanness and profaneness/ uncleanness (44:23; 22:26; Lv 10:10f)?
3. What were the prince's special privileges, responsibilities and restrictions (a) in the sanctuary, in (b) its worship and (c) in the land itself (ch. 46)? Why were these made so very specific (Dt 17:16-20; 1 S 8:11-17; Jr 21:1; 22:7-5; Ek 22:27)? Should rulers have similar privileges and responsibilities among God's people today in your society (Mt 22:21; 2 P 2:13-17; Ro 13:1-7; Tt 3:1; Jn 19:11)? Do they in some constitutional monarchies even in the 21st century?
4. What evidence is there here that Yahweh's holiness has ethical as well as ritual dimensions? How important does economic justice seem to be to God? How is your ethical holiness as one of God's Christian ["in Christ"] saints [holy ones] expressed in your daily life (RO 6:1-7, 12-23; 12:1f; Cl 3:1-17; 1 P 1:14-16), especially in as practical economic dimensions (Lv 19:9f; 23:22; Dt 24:19-21; Ac 2:44f; 4:32-35; Ja 2:1-9, 12-20; 5:1-4; 1 Jn 3:17)?
5. Does Ek 45:20 suggest that special religious care should be extended to those who are mentally naïve/ simple/ handicapped/ disabled/ challenged? What might this imply for Christian congregations today?

1. What characteristics of this river and its effects are unusual for a normal physical river? Might that suggest that this is not a physical river? Why? Could this stream be what Jesus was speaking about in Jn 4:10-14 and/ or 7:37-40)? How might it be connected with the New Jerusalem's river of life (Rv 22:1f)?
2. How do you imagine this spring-fed river and the life that it brings to the land? How is this a fitting recurring image of Yahweh's being the source of his people's spiritual and physical life and well-being (Ps 1:1-3; 46:41; Is 33:21f; Jr 17:8; Ek 19:10)?
3. What significance do you find in the river flowing east into the Arabah [Jordan Valley] and south into its Dead Sea bringing new life and healing to the most desolate and apparently irrecoverable region in all the land? How does this fit with Jesus' own ministry strategy (Mk 2:16f; Lk 19:10)? Should Christian missions today follow this strategy too? Why?
4. How does the treatment of aliens just the same as native-borne Israelites prefigure the equal inclusion of Gentiles in the people of God in the New Testament (Mt 28:19; Lu 24:47; Ac 1:8; 2:5; 10:34f; Ro 5:9; 14:6; 1 Co 12:13; Gn 3:28; Ep 2:13-22; Cl 3:1f)?
5. In light of the north-south geographical layout and communication lines of the ancient and present and of Palestine/ Israel, what seems to be so unusual about the arrangement of the tribal divisions of the land set forth in ch. 48? Could the great earthquake promised in Ek 38:19f rearrange the terrain enough to make such a distribution quite suitable? What rationale can you see in this order of allotting tribal territories (Nu 2)? How does the name of the central city (48: 35) epitomize the main feature of this arrangement? How important is that name (Ex 33:14-16; Rv 21:3)? How does Ezekiel's apocalyptic vision of Yahweh's future dwelling among his people, compare with Rv 21:1-22:5's vision of that relationship? What does this future divine-human relationship mean to you? How many of its features and benefits are available to you right now as a Christian (2 Co 3:17f; Ep 1:3-12; 2:20-23; He 10:9-22)? How much of this have you experienced so far? What more do you look forward to (Ro 8:18-25)? Why?
6. What might be the significance of the very frequent use of the sentence "I am Yahweh" spread throughout the book of Ezekiel?

INTRODUCTION TO LAMENTATIONS

The English title aptly describes this little book's contents, for it consists of five separate elegies on the sorrows of Judah and Jerusalem in the siege and destruction of Jerusalem brought on by Yahweh's judgement of their sins. The destruction of the city and the decimation of other population which Jeremiah prophesied, Lamentations presents in tragic vividness. Although the physical suffering was in itself shattering enough, beyond it laid the tormenting spiritual question, "Why did this happen?" (1:1; 2:1; 4:1). Even though God's judgement on their sins was not considered unjust, yet the final disaster caused a crisis of faith with which the book's theology of doom and hope tries to cope. Disaster striking so soon after the great reforms of good king Josiah just didn't seem to fit the pattern of history taught by Deuteronomy and much of the wisdom literature (Ps 1). Furthermore, wasn't David's city, Zion, considered impregnable, because it was the dwelling place of Yahweh himself? Yet Babylon breached her walls and even burnt Yahweh's inviolable temple. What, therefore, were God's people to believe now? Lamentations was written to express these tensions through liturgical catharsis and confession, in order to encourage the acceptance of God's judgement as just and to offer hope beyond it, because their Gracious Sovereign, Yahweh, would ultimately accomplish good for his people and creation.

Although the book as it stands is anonymous, Jewish tradition from at least the time of the mid-3rd century B.C. Greek LXX translation attributes it to Jeremiah and places it in "The Prophets" section. Nevertheless, in the resultant Hebrew Bible it is linked with The Song of Songs, Ruth, Koheleth [Ecclesiastes] and Esther in "the Writings" section. The book certainly has close affinities with Jeremiah's prophecy in sensitivity, style and theology. While the first four chapters seem to be the work of an eyewitness, the last one may well date from a slightly later time when the sharp pain of defeat had dulled to the chronic ache of captivity. From the early years of the exile on, this book was traditionally read liturgically by the Jews at the annual mid-July ceremony mourning the destruction of Solomon's temple ([586 B.C.] Zc 7:1-7), and later also of Herod's grand temple [70 A.D.].

All five of the elegies are written in acrostic form. In the 1st, 2nd and 4th ones each verse begins with a fresh letter of the Hebrew alphabet from beginning to end. In the 3rd elegy there are twenty-two groups of three short verses with each of the three in a group beginning with the same letter of the alphabet. In the 5th lament the acrostic pattern is not followed as consistently. Although this pattern may be an aid for memorization, it also may be intended to give a sense of completeness to the confession of sin and expression of grief. The strict structure probably helped keep the poet's own personal lament from degenerating into an uncontrolled wail, howl or whimper. It just stops short of becoming a dirge (2 S 1:19-27), for Jerusalem is not pictured as a corpse, but as a lonely widow (1:1), who at times herself joins in the lamentation (1:12, 16, 18-22). The five distinct acrostic poems suggest that each elegy is self-contained. The acrostic form also indicates that readers should not expect a logical development of the theme in each song, and perhaps not even in the series, but just five sequential medleys on the same theme.

ANALYSIS OF LAMENTATIONS:

- 1 1st elegy.
- 2 2nd elegy.
- 3 3rd elegy.
- 4 4th elegy.
- 5 5th elegy.

1. According to Ps 137, what were the feelings of the exiles after hearing of the destruction of Jerusalem? What mistreatment by their captors and enemies were particularly hard to bear thereafter? When has something very important to you been destroyed? What responses by others made this hardest to take for you?
2. Do the exiles' ways of dealing with their negative feelings in the psalm, warrant Christians coping with their negative feelings in similar ways (Is 13;16; 1-Ho 13:16; Na 3:10)? Why? How is that possible for you?
3. What image in Lm 1 portrays the exiled inhabitants of Jerusalem? What are the specific ingredients in the cup of sorrow? How and why did they come about? What about your own sorrows? Which are the hardest to bear? How so?
4. Have you ever said or thought "there is no pain/ sorrow like my pain/ sorrow" (Lm 1:12)? In what sense is this always true for each person in the midst of suffering? In what senses is this not really so (1 Co 10:13)? Would that have been any comfort to you at the time? What, however, might have been (2 Co 1:37)?
5. Who is addressed in Lm 1:12-22? Who is blamed? What is wanted? Would you pray this way? Why?

1. How do the many verbs in 2:1-9 present the intensity of Yahweh's anger against his people? Why was he so angry? Who within Israel are affected by his anger? In what ways? How did they respond? How did Israel's enemies respond (2:15-19, 22)?
2. According to chs. 2 and 3, which of Yahweh's purposes had already been fulfilled? Despite the apparent unrelieved disaster, where is there a ray of hope? Are God's people really ever totally without all hope? Is there ever a time they can't pray to him and explain their concerns? Nevertheless, will they necessarily feel he has heard their prayers (3:8, 41)?
3. What change of attitude towards Yahweh can you detect from 3:1-20 to 3:22-31? What accounts for that change (3:21)? Which of the ways of explaining how they felt before and after can you identify with? What influences you to change your attitudes towards God? Why? Can you draw upon a faith like that in Lm 3:22-25 (Ex 34:6f Ps 78:38; 16:5; 73:26), to enable you to wait silently alone while still clearly remembering (Lm 3:19)? Would such trust help you to discover hope (3:26-33)?
4. How seriously do you take the practical implications of Yahweh's great concern for justice (3:31-36)? How do you share his concern about your personal, social, political and economic relations with others? Can you really trust him to treat you justly?
5. If there is here a clear sense of both Judah's sinfulness (3:39-42) and of the reality of Yahweh's righteous judgement (3:43-51), why is there also still a sense the Jews having suffered human injustice (3:52-54)? To what extent, then, is their supplication in 3:55-66 justified? In what ways can you identify with them here?

1. In ch. 4, upon what classes of people in Judah has the calamity come? Yet who is primarily blamed for its coming? Can we expect only guilty people to suffer the consequences of sin in an evil and interconnected world? Why? What might Christians learn from this (1 P 2:20; 3:14, 17f; Is 8:12f)?
2. How much was Edom involved in Jerusalem's fall (4:21f; Ps 137:7; Is 34:5-15; Jr 49:7-22; Ek 35:3-15)? Why should Edom beware in their rejoicing over Judah's great fall? Does Jr 40:11 suggest that Edom played a more helpful role for some refugees? What note of comfort *is* there for the exiled Judeans? Would that comfort you in their place? Why?
3. How does the later elegy in ch. 5 illustrate the great wisdom of He 12:11? How have you experienced this important truth? How well do you think you will remember it next time?
4. How were both the woeful confession of 5:16 and the humble supplication of 5:19-22, suitable in the exiles' situation? How suitable might they also be for the people of your present Christian congregation? Why?
5. What developments can you detect through this series of five laments? Looking back, can you recall any similar developments in your own prolonged lamentations? What accounts for these changes?

INTRODUCTION TO ISAIAH.

Isaiah, "the evangelical prophet", began his ministry in Judah at the end of Uzziah's reign, and continued it through the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (Is 1:1). An ancient Jewish tradition, possibly alluded to in He 11:37, has him slain by being sawn in half during Manasseh's terrible reign. If this is so, than his prophetic ministry spanned 40-60 years. He was certainly a man of outstanding faith in Yahweh who had a great influence upon his fellow-countrymen. He seems to have been well at home in both the court and temple, and was probably a Jerusalemite, possibly even of noble birth.

He had to contend with many difficulties in Judah, for the moral and spiritual conditions of the people were corrupt. The rich oppressed the poor and reveled in wanton luxury; justice was shamelessly bought and sold. When in distress, people turned to idols; when in danger, they sought political alliances with pagan powers. Isaiah, however, urged a quiet faith in Yahweh as the only secure path. When, in the extreme crisis of the Assyrian invasion in 701 BC, his advice was followed by Hezekiah, it was triumphantly vindicated in the destruction of the Assyrian army.

While Isaiah spoke much of impending judgement, he foresaw also the coming of God's Messiah and the establishment of his Messianic kingdom. His interest was not confined to Judah alone, for he prophesied concerning Israel, whose overthrow he witnessed, and even the surrounding pagan nations.

The last 27 chapters (40-66) contain a very remarkable collection of prophecies spoken primarily for the warning and comfort of the people of God who would live during the exile in Babylon after the destruction of Jerusalem about 160 years after Isaiah's own time. In other visions, recorded earlier in his book (e.g., 13:1-14:23; 21:1-10; 35; 39:6), he had already foreseen the rise of Babylon to power and glory, her downfall and the release of her Jewish captives. But these striking later prophecies present Yahweh's glad message of redemption much more fully and are vividly addressed to the poor exiles as if by a contemporary prophet. The relevance of the details and the contemporary character of these prophecies to the exiles, have led many modern biblical scholars to view the latter half of the book as the product of one or more later prophets following in Isaiah's school of prophecy. However, both ancient Jewish tradition [including the Dead Sea Scrolls] and the New Testament writers treat the book as a unity coming from the pen of the 8th century BC Isaiah.

We, however, are reading the book in three sections, because of their immediate relevance to three periods of Israel's history: the Divided Kingdom (chs. 1-23), the Kingdom of Judah (chs. 24-39) and the Exile and Post-exile (chs. 40-66). This, however, does not necessarily imply that there were originally three books that were assembled by a later editor. Unless one believes *a priori* that prophecies can't truly be predictive, then the date of their primary relevance need not determine the date of their origin. There are far too many signs of the book's unity at many levels for that scenario to be likely. Furthermore, biblical prophets frequently foretell as well as forth-tell God's message, even in the New Testament (e.g., Ac 11:27f; 21:10-14). Indeed, successful foretelling is one of the characteristic marks of a true prophet of Yahweh (Dt 13:1-5; 18:21f; I S3:19; 1 K 22:28; Jr 28:9; 29:9).

ANALYSIS OF ISAIAH:

1-39	Judgement:	Divide Kingdom [HTB V]
1-12	Judah's sins.	
13-23	Judgement of the nations.	
24-27	Yahweh's purpose in judgement.	Kingdom of Judah [HTB VI]
28-35	Warning against human efforts for salvation.	
36-39	Historical interlude.	
40-66	Comfort:	Exile and post Exile [HTB VII]
40-48	Deliverance.	
49-59	Expiation.	
60-66	Glory.	

1. In what ways was the message of the prologue to Isaiah 40-66 (40:1-11) much more comforting to the people of God during the exile than was the immediately preceding prophecy of Isaiah about the postponement of the exile (39:5-8), that had given king Hezekiah personal comfort over a century earlier? How did the Christians of the New Testament interpret these words of comfort in the 1st century A.D. (e.g., Mt 3:3; Jn 10:11; 1 P 1:23-25)? How pertinent is this message of divine comfort for God's people today (2 Co 1:4)?
2. Why is it that sometimes it seems necessary for some people to suffer more or less than their sins actually warrant (Is 40:2; 65:7; Lv 26:18; Jr 16:16-18; 17:18; Ez 9:12-15)? Has this ever happened to you personally? How do you interpret God's purpose in that?
3. How important is it for all of God's people to remember the great contrast that is articulated in 40:6-8 (Is 51:12f; Ps 90:5f; 102:11; 103:15; Jb 14:2; Ja 1:9-11; 1 P 1:24f)? When is it most important to keep this contrast in mind? Why?
4. How is Yahweh characterized in 40:9-28? How do tremendous words of comfort for Yahweh's people follow from those very characteristics of Yahweh? How could taking these same characteristics of God seriously transform your own attitudes, motives, hopes and experiences (Ro 12:1f)?
5. Does 40:26 suggest that Yahweh can be known in some respects and to some extent by any human being simply by observing nature? In what respects (Ps 8:1; 19:1; 50:6; Ro 1:19f; Ac 14:16f; 17:28)? To what extent (Is 55:8f; 1 Co 2:10-14; Ro 1:21-23, 25, 28; Ac 17:27; He 11:2, 6)?
6. Who is Yahweh that his great promises to his servants, the descendants of his friend Abraham, are reliable, in spite of the opposition of the surrounding nations (41:1-20; 40:15-17) and their gods (41:21-29)? Which of these promises are still relevant today to God's people, including Christians (Ro 4:10-17; 15:4-6; Ga 3:29)? Which ones are most important to you? Why? What are the gods of the nations today? How are these gods as impotent as ever, in comparison to Yahweh, our God (Is 40:18, 26; 46:5)?

1. Who is/ are Yahweh's servant(s) here? How much of this passage applies (a) to Israel (41:8f; 42:22; 44:1), (b) to an individual Messiah (Mt 12:15-21) and/ or (c) to Christians as Yahweh's later-day servant(s)? What are Yahweh's purposes for his servant(s)? How are they to be accomplished? How interested are you in those purposes? How central is being "a light to the nations/ gentiles", to God's people's identity as Yahweh's servant(s) (42:6; 49:6; 51:4; 60:1, 3)? How is this related to being Yahweh's [Jehovah's] witnesses (43:10; 44:8)? Who are Yahweh's witnesses today? Are we Christians today as unequivocally clear and adamant in our witness to Yahweh's divine uniqueness and singularity as are contemporary Jews and Moslems (43:10; 44:6,8; 45:5f)? Why? Should we Christians, Jews and Muslims, therefore, view each other as fellow partners in God's/ Allah's service? What might be the practical implications of this? Should we also include Jehovah's Witnesses in such a partnership? Why?
2. Is the oft repeated criterion of 42:9 (41:22-29; 45:21; 46:10f; 48:3, 5-7) sufficient to distinguish a living god from a dead idol? Why? Can that criterion be employed today? How?
3. What two different pictures of Yahweh's servant are shown here? How could they apply to one and the same servant of Yahweh? How might this apply to you?
4. How many different ways does Yahweh present himself here? Are they all compatible? How so? How do you relate to each of these presentations of God?
5. How is the relationship between Yahweh and his people described here? How do the titles given to Yahweh and to his people express that relationship? What titles do you employ when speaking to or about Yahweh? What conceptions (a) of God's relationship to you and (b) of your relationship to him do they literally express? How conscious are you usually of these meanings? How seriously do you really intend them? What might this imply about the state of your Christian worship and walk? What might those who know you best think about your religious talk and walk? What might it make them think about God and Christianity? What should this mean to those called to be Yahweh's (43:10) and Christ's (Lk 24:48; Jn 15:26f; Ac 1:8; 2 Co 5:20) witnesses/ ambassadors?

1. How in this passage does Yahweh answer some of the realistic objections that could be raised about his promise to deliver sinful Israel from mighty Babylon? How might these answers reassure his exiled people? How pertinent are God's replies also to us Christians with respect to our promised redemption as individuals and as his people? How does this apply to you?
2. Are 43:25 and 44:22 general statements about Yahweh's forgiveness? How do they fit with the principle in Ep 2:8-10? Does this imply that no actual atonement or redemption for sin is really necessary for a loving God to forgive human sin (Ro 3:21-26; 1 Jn 2:11; 4:10f)? How so? After a sufficient atonement, who would still need to be reconciled to whom (Is 44:22; 2 Co 5:18-21)? How should all this be expressed in a Christian's presentation of the gospel/ good news of reconciliation, redemption and repentance to others?
3. In your own words, what is the criticism of idolatry presented in 44:6-20? How does it go beyond the criticisms given in Is 40:18-20; 41:22-29; 42:9 and 45:21? What are idols? What do they represent? To what do even the idol-makers themselves unwittingly bear witness (44:9)? Are all idols lies (1 Th 1:9)? How so? Who are today's idol makers? How aware are they of their idol making and lying (44:18; Ro 1:21-23, 28)? How deeply is idolatry rooted in your culture? How can Christians identify the more subtle types of modern idolatry? Why should they try (1 Jn 5:21; 1 Co 10:14)
4. According to 44:21-28, how very different is Yahweh from any man-made god? How very different must it, therefore, be to be called to be his servant, witness and messenger? What is your response to the privilege of knowing and serving the one and only true and living God (1 Th 1:9)? Because Yahweh is the only real and living God, what can his people count on? What can and do you count on Yahweh for?
5. What do you make of Cyrus, king of Persia [539-530 B.C.] being frequently called Yahweh's Anointed [Messiah] by Isaiah (41:2, 25; 44:28; 45:1-14; 46:11 & 48:14) well over a century before his coming into the history of God's people (2 Ch 36:22f; Ez 1:1-4)? Is predictive prophecy really possible? How so? According to Isaiah in these very contexts (41:21-29; 42:9; 44:7), how does this apparent human impossibility demonstrate who Yahweh really is? Yet in spite of Isaiah's explicit argument, why do you think many modern biblical scholars view this specific prophecy (44:28) as an indicator that the whole second half (ch. 40-66) of the canonical Book of Isaiah was written in Cyrus' time or later?

1. When have you felt like questioning God's purposes or ways? Why? How might the two-fold answer of 45:9-13 have helped you then (29:16)? What further help does Ro 9:20-24 bring? How can the same metaphor of our human dependency on our Maker be used in other positive ways (Is 64:8-12; Jr 18:6-11)? How fundamental a role do you think this metaphor play in Christian thinking about God and humanity (Is 55:8)?
2. According to ch. 45, why should all people everywhere eventually acknowledge Yahweh as the one and only true God (45:23; Ro 1:16-20; 14:10-12)? How persuasive are these reasons today? How is Is 45:23 used by the apostle Paul in Ro 14:11 and Ph 2:11? By whom, then, is it that Jesus the Christ/ Messiah of God is going to be confessed universally to be as "Lord" in Ph 2:11? Is this same claim and acknowledgement also being made in the earliest Christian confession (Jn 20:29; 1 Co 12:3)?
3. What does it mean to say that Yahweh is "a God who hides himself" (Is 45:15)? Is this the same sort of divine hiding spoken of in Is 1:15; 8:17; 57:17 and Ps 44:24? How is Yahweh's hiddenness here compatible with his self-revelation, which is also spoken of here (45:19) and in 55:6-11? How is God's being concealed related to his holiness and transcendence? Is God's hiding something that he just decides to do or not do, or something essential to his very being God?
4. What further implicit arguments are there in Is 46:1-7 against idolatry? How powerful are they these days'?
5. What does Yahweh's gracious commitment to the remnant of Israel in 46:3f mean to you personally? Why might it seem more and more relevant as you grow older? In these days, how much more meaningful is Jesus' final commitment to his followers in Mt 28:20; Ac 1:8?
6. How certain are Yahweh's prophecies (46:8-10) compared to those of Babylon's astrologers (47:13-15)? How effective is Yahweh's purpose (46:10-13) compared to those of Babylon's sorcerers (47:9, 12)? Yet, how do the attitudes and behaviours of the Israelites and Babylonians compare in chs. 46 & 47? How do their fates compare, when Yahweh purposely summons Cyrus, his bird of prey from the east (46:11)? What accounts for their different fates (46:13; 47:4, 6f)? Furthermore, who alone can truly say "I am, and there is no one besides me" (47:8, 10; 46:9)? Other than God's own people (46:8f), who today would do well to be mindful of this truth? Why?

1. In 48:1-11, what is there about Israel's swearing by his name that so concerned Yahweh? Is this a good reason for never – or even just very rarely – using God's self-revealed personal covenant name, "Yahweh" (Ex 3:13-15; 20:7; Dt 5:11)?
2. In 48:16, is there a disclosure of the trinitarian nature of the one and only God, Yahweh? Who is the "I/ me" here? Who exactly is called "the Lord/ Sovereign Yahweh" here: (a) the Trinity as a whole; (b) every person of the Trinity; or (c) one person in particular?
3. According to ch. 48, why does God reveal some things to his people in advance, yet keeps other things hidden from them until they actually take place? How is this dependent upon the characters of Yahweh's and his people? Is this as true of both today as it was then? Is this true of God's relationship to individuals as well as to his people as a whole? What are your attitudes and responses to God's revelatory ways in your own history?
4. How does the servant song of 49:1-13 apply to Israel, Jesus and to Christians (49:3; Ph 2:5-11; Jn 17:18; 20:21; Ac 13:46-48)? How could 49:4-7 be a word of encouragement to all of these servants of Yahweh (1 Co 15:58)? When might it be an encouragement to you personally?
5. What answers does Yahweh give in 49:14-50:3 to those of his people who doubt his promises of deliverance? How could these answers speak to your doubts about God's ability and willingness to save you and your congregation? Do they help you to trust wait hopefully for Yahweh to act on your behalf (49:23b; Pr 3:5f)?

1. How do the characteristics and the divinely given resources of the servant of Yahweh sketched in 50:4-11 apply to Jesus and God's Messiah? How could Jesus also be your example in these respects? Have you, e.g., the ear and tongue of a disciple as Jesus did (Jn 5:19-21, 30; 6:38; 12:29f 14:10; 17:8, 14, 25f)? Do you also, like him, expect and rely upon Yahweh's help (Is 50:7, 9) and vindication (50:8) rather than your own devices (50:11), even in the darkest hour (50:10; Mt 26:38f, 42; Lk 22:42)?
2. What encouragements are given to God's people in 51:1-8? Which of these help you most? Why? What might it mean for you to listen/ pay attention to each of these (Re 15:4; 2 P 3:10-15)? How do you personally respond to human reproach and reviling?
3. According to 51:9-16, what two examples of Yahweh's past mighty creative deliverances should encourage and strengthen the suffering and depressed exiles of his people in Babylon? Why do you think these examples are repeated?
4. How does 51:17-52:12 develop the general theme of 40:1-11? What reasons have you to be comforted and to rejoice right now?
5. Have you ever heard the equivalent good news from and about Yahweh that the exiles were to hear (52:6f; Mt 1:23; 28:18, 20)? What would it mean to you? Why?

1. How many parallels can you see between the details of Yahweh's servant's character and life as presented in this servant song and the character, life and passion of Jesus, God's messiah, as presented in the New Testament? How justified, then, are Christians in identifying Jesus of Nazareth as Isaiah's promised suffering servant of Yahweh, as did John the Baptist (Jn 1:29) and Jesus himself (Mk 10:45; Mt 20:28; 26:28; Jn 10:11)?
2. How is Jesus' being Yahweh's suffering servant compatible with his also being God's kingly, priestly and prophetic messiah as Christians maintain (Is 52:13; 53:12; Ac 3:22-24; Ph 2:6-11; He 2:9; 4:14-16)?
3. How apt a description of human sinning is the wandering sheep simile of Is 53:6? How well does it apply to people you know? How about to yourself? Does Yahweh himself cause this (63:17)?
4. Who will benefit from the ministry/ service of Yahweh's servant? How? Why? What response to his service is appropriate? How do you yourself respond? In what respects are Christians to be suffering servants too (Mt 20:25-28; Mk 10:42-45; Lk 22:25-27; Jn 12:24-26; 17:14, 18; 20:21)?
5. How has Is 52:13-53:12 coloured the popular conceptions of Jesus' passion in both Christian and secular circles? What past and present examples can you give, in various media? What details of ch. 53 do seem to fit well with those of the four canonical gospels' passion stories? What details of both don't seem to fit together so well? What other aspects/ dimensions of Jesus' passion need to be kept in focus as well as the suffering servant one? How compatible are those aspects?

1. In ch. 54 what two extended metaphors are used to describe Yahweh's past and future relationship with his servant people? Which metaphor do you appreciate more? How do you think it might apply to you and your congregation? How do both of the metaphors reappear together again in Rv 21:9? What might that indicate about the relationship between the "wife of the lamb" (Rv 21:9) and "the holy city, new Jerusalem" (Rv 21:2, 10)?
2. What are the implications for God's people then and now of each of the many titles of God in Is 54:5? Why should that make you as a Christian member of Yahweh's people today "shout for joy" (54:1) and/ or "fear not" (54:4)?
3. Does the great divine appeal of ch. 55 apply to God's alienated people today as much as it did to the Jewish exiles in 6th century B.C. Babylon? Why? How could Yahweh's basic argument here be expressed in your own words for the spiritually alienated people that you know best? Should it be? By whom? What results are promised to follow for those who welcome Yahweh's appeal? Do these promises still apply? How does all this relate to Yahweh's character and purposes?
4. How important is it for all humans to remember the theme of Is 55:8f (40:28; Ho 11:9; Jb 11:7-9; Ro 11:33)? How is Yahweh's otherness/ transcendence connected with his hiddenness (Is 45:15)? How does this fundamental "gap" necessitate divine self-revelation/ disclosure, if God and his ways are to be known reliably by human beings (55:10f; Ro 11:33ff; 1 Co 2:10-12)? What implications might this have for human systematic attempts to understand God, his ways and his purposes?
5. How does 55:10f in its context help you to understand the great purpose, authority and power of God's word, whether spoken or written (Ps 19:7-14; 119; 2 Ti 3:15-17; He 4:12)? How could this unique character of God's word be described in your own words? What implications does this have for your own use of the bible as "the Word of God written" (Westminster Confession of Faith 1.2)?

1. According to Is 56:1-8, what criteria are used by Yahweh to recognize the true members of his own people? Might these criteria also help Christians wishing to define what a true Christian is? How inclusive does Yahweh seem to want his people to be? What implications might this have for you and your congregation?
2. How does Jesus apply 56:7 to his cleansing of the court of the Gentiles in Herod's great temple (Mt 21:12f; Mk 11:15-17; Lk 19:45-47)? To what extent is your congregation's meeting place both "my [Yahweh's] house of prayer" and "a house of prayer for all the peoples" (56:7)? How inclusive is your prayer fellowship/ partnership?
3. How relevant is Yahweh's strong critique of the leaders of his people then (56:9-12) to the leaders of your Christian congregation? Is the philosophy of life of 56:12 still prevalent today (Lk 12:19)? What sort of approach to the present and future does that philosophy engender? What is wrong with that?
4. How would you describe the character of God as presented in 57:14-21? How does it fit with Yahweh's strong words to his people's leaders (56:9-12) and also to the idolaters among them (57:1-13)? Do you think that you should be a recipient of Yahweh's peace/ rest/ wellbeing ["shalom"] (57:19-21)? Why?
5. In ch. 58 how does Yahweh's view true fasting compare with his people's typical religious uses of fasting? How interested are you in the blessings Yahweh promises to those who truly fast and honour his holy days? How should Christians today truly practice these things? Could this be part of the "worshiping in spirit and truth" that Jesus said the Father seeks (Jn 4:23f)?

1. Do 59:1f and 15f, plus many similar passages, really imply that Yahweh is embodied and has bodily parts? What, then, is meant? How is such use of body language consistent with how human behaviours are presented in 59:3, 7, 10? What might be a better way to express such matters today? How about the meaning of the metaphors in 59:7 and Ep 6:14?
2. To what extent is 59:1-15 a fairly accurate description of much of the normal life of what many often call a "Christian society"? Why should members of such a society really wonder that God doesn't seem to hear and answer their prayers for justice and deliverance (59:9-11)? Do such people really know what their iniquities are without being told (59:12f; Ps 51:3)? What might happen if Yahweh did answer their prayers (59:16-20)? Will he indeed do so? On what basis?
3. What hope is, however, promised in 59:20f for those of God's people who return to him and to his ways? How can you and your family take full advantage of that promised hope?
4. How are God's people enabled to fulfill their long-standing calling/ vocation to be "a light to the nations/ gentiles" (Gn 12:2f; 22:18; Is 42:6; 51:4; 52:9f; 60:1,3; Ac 3:25f; Ga 3:8)? Why are Christians to be involved in that same divine commission (Mk 16:15; Mt 5:14; 28:19f; Lk 24:45-49; Jn 17:18; 20:21)? How is this great enterprise possible for mere human beings like them and like us (Is 60:1-3; Mt 5:15f; 28:20; Ac 1:8)?
5. How would you describe in your own words ch. 60's portrait of the new Jerusalem? How would this bring new hope to the Jewish exiles of the 6th century B.C.? How relevant would this hope be for suffering Christians late in the 1st century A.D. (Rv 21:1-22:5)? How is the new city connected with God's people being a light to the nations (Mt 5:14ff)? What roles does Yahweh himself play in this great hope? To what extent are the joys and blessings spoken of in Is 60 and Rv 21 & 22, already available spiritually for all those who come to know God in and through Jesus, God's Messiah (2 Co 3:18; 4:6; 6:16-18; Ep 3:14-21)? How far have you personally entered into them?

1. Why do you think Jesus ended his reading of Is 61:1ff in the synagogue of Nazareth (Lk 4:18f) at the end of the first line of v. 2? How well does this scripture reveal the purpose and scope of Jesus' earthly ministry? How did his public ministry succeed in glorifying Yahweh (Is 61:3; Mt 5:16; 9:8; 15:31; Mk 2:12; Lk 4:15; 5:25f; 7:16; 13:13; 17:15; 18:43; 23:47; Jn 1:14, 17; 17:4)? What did Jesus' fellow townspeople think and feel about Jesus' claim that these great messianic predictions were fulfilled that very day? How might you have reacted to such an astounding claim from an apparently well-known neighbour? What does Jesus claim to be the Messiah of God, inaugurating the messianic age, mean to you as a Christian?
2. When the messianic age comes (61:4), how will the special covenantal priestly role of God's people be realized (Ex 19:51; Is 61:6; 56:6f; Rv 1:5f)? Do you see yourself as a minister/ servant and priest of God (1 P 2:5, 8)? On whose behalf (Is 61:5-9, 11)? Who makes this possible (61:9-11)? Is this a service of joy for you (61:7,10f)? How so?
3. How do each of the many names given to God's people in chs. 61 and 62 reveal Yahweh's good purposes for them and their land? Which of these names and associated blessings matter most to you as a member of God's people today?
4. What is involved in the role of the watchman that Yahweh appoints in 62:6? Is that ministry still needed today? Who should be exercising it? Why? What would be the consequences of neglecting it?
5. Why must the coming day of Yahweh's salvation for his people (61:1-9) also involve Yahweh's recompense/ vengeance (61:2, 8; 63:4; Ro 1:16-19)? Do you remember this when you pray for Jesus' to return soon (Rv 22:20; 1 Co 16:22; Ti 2: 13)? How should you, then live (Ti 2:12; 1 P 4:7-11; 2 P 3:11, 14, 17f)?

1. Do you preface your prayers in time of need (63:15-19) as the prophet did here (63:7-14)? Why is it important to do so? Does this help you understand why many traditional patterns of Christian worship place a prayer of adoration before any prayers of confession, thanksgiving and supplication, let alone any other types of prayer?
2. What events in the early life of Yahweh's relationship to Israel are recalled in the prophet's adoration? What role does he see God's Holy Spirit playing in their lives and history? What do you remember of the many roles the Holy Spirit has played in your spiritual life and history so far (Nu 11:17, 25, 29)? Are you aware of God's Spirit acting in your life now? Has his Spirit given you rest yet (Is 21:44; 23:1)? How so?
3. Could the rebellion of God's people (63:8-10) really catch him by surprise? Yet why did it grieve his Holy Spirit (63:10)? Have you ever grieved the Holy Spirit (Ep 4:29-32)? How so?
4. How does the prophet's continuing relationship with Yahweh as the father of his people (63:16; 64:8; Jr 3:4, 19; 31:9) provide the foundation for his prayers of confession (64:5-7), supplication (63:15; 64:9) and inquiry (63:17-64:1, 5f)? Should this be the same for Christians (Mt 6:9; Lk 11:2)? Do you mix together different types of prayer, just as Isaiah does? Do you think this mixing is this alright with God?
5. What questions did the prophet ask Yahweh? What questions would you like to ask your Heavenly Father? How often do you present him with prayers of inquiry? Is Is 64:6f a partial answer to the prophet's questions in 63:17 and 64:5 (Ro 1:21-32)?
6. Who causes you to sin (Is 53:6; 63:17; Jr 50:6; Ek 34:4f)? Can God, therefore, be blamed for your sinning?

1. How does 65:1-12 help you understand God's relationship to his rebellious, yet self-righteous, people? What is new about this perspective for you? How might such insight into Yahweh's viewpoint influence your attitude towards him or change your view of his relationship to you? Who really takes the initiative in this relationship (65:1f, 12; 66:4; (Gn 3:8f; Ro 5:8)? Do you welcome that initiative (Jn 1:12f; Ep 2:8f), or reject it (65:11f; 66:24)?
2. How does 65:7 clarify why Israel suffered double for her sinning according to 40:2? How could she have avoided that extra suffering? How applicable might this be to you and/ or your congregation?
3. What light does the cluster of grapes metaphor in 65:8-10 throw upon the remnant of God's people to be spared for the future?
4. How do the benefits of worshiping and serving the god of fortune or the god of fate/ destiny (65:11f) compare with those of serving the God of truth/ faithfulness (65:13-16)? According to 65:16, how is this possible? Why, then, do so many people today prefer the same alternative gods to true/ faithful Yahweh?
5. What do you think of the renewed age/ world that Yahweh promises to create (65:17-25; 66:22)? How much more about this great hope is revealed to John by Jesus in Rv 21:1-22:5? What does 2 P 10, 12f add? Which aspects of this do you like best? How do you interpret 65:16f with respect to memories of this present age? How do 65:20, 22 and 66:22 fit with the common belief in human immortality in the new age (1 Co 15:51-54; 2 Co 5:1-4)? How might those who don't welcome Yahweh's gracious initiative (65:24) feel about the prospect of their being included in Yahweh's new age/ world? Where might they prefer to be (66:24; Mk 9:48; Mt 3:12; 25:41; Rv 20:10, 14f; 21:8)? Who makes that other new option possible? Could that possibility itself also be an indirect witness to God's graciousness?
6. How well do the details of chs. 60-62 prophecies about a renewed Jerusalem fit the new Jerusalem of John's vision in Rv 21f? Which details don't seem to fit too well? Might this warrant seeking their fulfillment in a somewhat earlier eschatological, but temporally-limited, universal millennial reign of God's Messiah and his associates (Rv 20:4-6)? Might this also apply to Ezekiel's extended visions of a new Israel and temple (Ek 40-48)? What else might all these prophecies mean to Jews and Christians?

1. How well do God's people then and now seem to remember what Solomon who built the great temple of Yahweh had fully acknowledged (2 Ch 6:18; Is 66:1f) when he dedicated his great temple of Yahweh?
2. According to 66:1-5, what does God value most in human worship? How does this compare with what we humans often emphasize? How might this evaluate your congregation's worship? What appropriate changes could be made? By whom?
3. How do those who respect Yahweh's word compare with those who don't heed His word? What is involved in respecting God's word? Is this distinction as clear cut in your mind, practice and experience as it seems to be to Yahweh?
4. How significant is it that the Bible includes female as well as male metaphors and similes to express Yahweh's relationship to his people (e.g., 66:7-13; Ps 103:13)? How, then, can many Christians consider God as male rather than female? Could Yahweh just as appropriately be called "heavenly mother" as "heavenly father" (63:16; 64:8; Jr 3:4, 19,22; Mt 6:9)? Which parental metaphor is evident in Ho 11:1f and Is 1:2? Why wouldn't a female appellation for Yahweh be very appropriate when Yahweh's people live surrounded by cultures with nature religions very preoccupied with mother goddesses, even with "Mother Earth"? Which parental metaphor for Yahweh would be most appropriate for Christians to employ in your own culture? How so?
5. To what extent has 66:18-24 already been fulfilled (Ac 2:5-12)? In what respects is it yet to be fulfilled? What does this mean for Christians today? Does 66:23 indicate that all created beings [Heb = all flesh] will ultimately be reconciled to Yahweh (Ph 2:10f; Cl 1:20; 1 Ti 2:4; 2 P 3:9)? What, then, does 66:24 and Rv 20:14f mean?

1. How often is writing down God's message said to be part of the human side of the divine-human interaction that produced our scriptures? What other examples can you think of? Do 7:28 and 8:26 suggest an editing stage may be part of that same process? Describe how both Daniel and Yahweh were actively involved in both visions here? Have you ever thought of keeping a journal of your dreams? For what purpose? How might you go about doing it? Might God sometimes be speaking to you through your dreams? Who might you share your dreams with? Why?
2. Supposing that the four kingdoms of chs 2 and 7 are the same, how do their differing symbols suggest quite different perspectives on them (1 S 16:7)? How do both visions clearly show the kingdoms' relationship to Yahweh's sovereignty (Ro 13:1)? How is the fifth kingdom quite different? How are the saints [holy ones] of the Most High God related to the five kingdoms (7:18, 21f, 25-27)? How are they related to the "one like a Son of Man" (7:13, 18, 27)? How does use of the "son of man" here relate to Yahweh's use the phrase regularly to refer to Ezekiel and occasionally to Daniel himself (8:17)? Why do you think Jesus prefer to call himself "the Son of Man"? Why, then, was the high priest so incensed when Jesus underlined his answer to his final question by quoting Dn 7:13 (Mt 26:63-66; Mk 14:61-64; Lk 22:67-71)?
3. How literally should we take the details of the description of Yahweh as the Ancient of Days seated on a fiery throne (7:9-14)? Why? Could that be the "great white throne" of Rv 20:11-15)? Or would the latter throne be Jesus' throne (2 Co 5:10)?
4. Why would many modern biblical scholars view the interpretation of Daniel's second vision (8:20-26) and the following predictions (9:27, 11:31 & 12:11) as historical references back to the sacrilegious acts of the Seleucid [Syrian Greek] king Antiochus IV, who in 167 B.C abolished the Jewish law and sacrifices and set up on the altar of burnt offerings in the temple a Greek one dedicated to Zeus and himself (1 Maccabees 1)? What in the passage, however, suggests that Antiochus IV, who designated himself "Theos Epiphanes" [God Manifested], was only an historical type of a similar, but far more formidable, opponent of God's rule who was to appear later in human history (Mt 24:15; 2 Th 2:7-10; 1 Jn 2:18f; 4:3)?
5. How might the time factors given in these two interrelated visions of Daniel dismay and perplex Daniel (8:27), especially in so far as he shared (Dn 9:2) Jeremiah's (Jr 25:11f; 29:10) and Ezekiel's (Ek 37:21-28) apparent expectation of the restoration of Judah (Jr 32:36-44) after 70 years of exile in Babylon (2 Ch 36:21; Ez 1:1)? Do we Christians feel the same about the apparent long delay of the historical consummation of the God's messianic kingdom? How should we cope with this (2 P 3:2-18)?

1. Why do you think that Daniel was neither invited to Belshazzar's banquet for Babylonian nobility nor summoned along with the Chaldeans ([master astrologers] 5:11) to read and interpret the strange graffiti?
2. What about the character of crown prince Belshzzar, ruler/ king of the city of Babylon, is revealed by his actions and responses to the writing? Why did he need Daniel's sermon? What factors made his sins more heinous? What do all leaders, even present-day Christian ones, need to learn from Daniel's sermon?
3. Why was Daniel quite uninterested in the highest honours that the crown prince could bestow (5:7, 16)? What did he value more? Would you have refused those honours? Why? What rewards do you seek? Why? What honours do you eschew? Why? Why do you think that Belshazzar honoured Daniel anyway, despite of his daring refusal, sermon and unfavourable interpretation? Would today's rulers do the same?
4. What characteristics of the elderly Daniel are revealed in ch. 6? How far would your critics have to look to find legitimate fault with you? Would it have to do with your faithfulness to God? How vital and evident is your regular personal prayer life? Through what dangers has your faith taken you? How can it be a crime to serve God rather than men (6:22; Ac 4:19; 5:29)? Why might some people think this (Jn 11:47-50; Ac 6:9-14; 16:18-22; 17:2-10; 19:24-27)?
5. Would any higher official or employer of yours be concerned enough to try to save you from either public ridicule and/ or the consequences of practicing your faith? Would they even know enough about your God or your faith in him to hope that he would save you from the consequences of your piety? Would they fast, forego entertainment or remain sleepless on your account? How well do others know and respect the living God because you openly serve him? What witness to God comes out of your faithful living (Mt 5:16; Ac 16:25-34; 1 P 2:12; 3:14-17; 4:11, 15f)?

1. How does Daniel's prayer life seem to relate to his study of the scriptures (9:2f)? How are the two related in your devotional life? How might they be more closely connected?
2. Do you think that your prayers might be more effective if they were accompanied, as Daniel's were here, by fasting, sackcloth and ashes? Why? What does 10:2f indicate about the sort of moderate fasting that Daniel was practicing? Under what circumstances does God appreciate moderation?
3. How do Daniel's prayers of confession and supplication (9:4-19) characterize Yahweh and his people, including Daniel himself (9:20)? What should Israel have learned from the great calamity that Yahweh had righteously brought upon Jerusalem for their sins? Why didn't they learn?
4. On what grounds does Daniel plead for God to listen, forgive and act on behalf of his people and city? Why does Yahweh respond to Daniel's prayer (9:20-23)? Does he really answer the prayer? How is that relevant to you (Jn 9:31; Ja 5:16)? Like Daniel, can you confess and plead for the forgiveness of others' sins as well as your own? Is this part of what is being done in the formal general confession in a Christian congregation?
5. How is Yahweh's message to Daniel through his messenger/ angel, Gabriel, both good and bad news (9:24-27)? Why might God's answers to your own prayers be similarly mixed? Yet how is this news an answer to Daniel's confession and supplication? Why?

1. What small windows of insight do chs. 10 and 12 give into the world of God's angels, their appearance, character and functions? How does this compare to your culture's popular conception of them? How does even a prominent bureaucrat like Daniel respond to them? Why do humans tend to tremble and fall down before them and must be told not to be afraid (Dn 10:12, 19; Mt 28:2-5; Lk 1:13,30; 2:10; He 1:14) but to stand up (10:11; Ek 2:1; 3:24; Rv 19:10; 22:8f)? How does this angel [Hebrew=messenger] minister to Daniel? How do they address each other? Why (Ps 8:5; He 2:5-8; 1 Co 6:2f)? What could that mean to you? How different are angels from God himself (Dn 12:7; Rv 19:10; 22:9)?
2. What do you make of the very detailed, but selective, preview in ch. 11 of Palestine's turbulent political and religious history for appointed times (11:27, 29) in the next four centuries? What seems to be the purpose of such detailed predictions, so accurate to history that modern scholars tend to believe that they could only have been written after the events? What impact would these events have upon the people of God and their land (10:14), later when they are caught in Judah between the warring forces of the constantly sparring post-Alexandrian Greek kings to their north [Seleucid Syria] and south [Ptolemaic Egypt]? What words of encouragement are offered to God's people and their future leaders? Which religious and moral attitudes and activities are criticized? On what grounds?
3. How do you think wise Daniel might have felt about the answers he got to his very sensible questions at the end of his last vision (12:6, 8)? How do you cope with not having all your questions answered by God's revelation? Why are God's people so often left by him so much in the dark about the future (Dn 12:4; 8:26; Rv 10:4)? Why do some Christians keep seeking to illuminate the darkest areas of biblical prophecies, especially those about the end times? How valuable would it be to focus primarily on matters that even perceptive Daniel didn't completely understand (12:8; 12:12; Ti 2:11-15; 2 P 3:10-15, 17)? Why, then, have so many bright people [e.g., even Sir Isaac Newton] spent so much time and energy trying to interpret the time details of Daniel's later visions, yet without finding persuasive solutions (Dn 8:26; 12:4, 9)?
4. What do you make of the clearest reference to an end-times general resurrection in the Old Testament in Dn 12:2, 13? How does this fit with what is presented in Rv 20: 4f & 12f? How much do you keep in mind this assured divine judgement (2 Co 5:10)? What do you expect will be "your allotted portion at the end of the age"? Will it be the same as Daniel's? Why?
5. In what ways have you found the book of Daniel personally helpful? At what points have you been able to identify with Daniel? Would you ever want God to call you to a public ministry like Daniel's? Why? How does his ministry compare with Joseph's in Egypt (Gn 39-50)? How can you support those whom God does call and equip for such public ministries (1 Ti 2:1-4, 8)?

INTRODUCTION TO PSALMS.

The Book of Psalms is the hymnbook of the Jewish "church", containing psalms for both public and private worship. Some seem to have been written for public worship [e.g., those with superscriptions "to the choirmaster"]. Others were probably original personal meditations that were later taken over for use in the sanctuary and/or family worship. There are also teaching poems and historical recitals. The total collection stood at the beginning of the third and final section of the Hebrew Scriptures, "The Writings", but sometimes that whole section was called "The Psalms".

All of the Psalms are in beautiful Hebrew poetry, which like much other Ancient Near Eastern poetry, does not depend on rhyming but upon parallelism of thought between two or more parts of a line and/or between groupings of two or more lines. The commonest general forms of parallelism are synonymous, antithetical and synthetic. In synonymous parallelism essentially the same thought is repeated in a different way (e.g., Ps 1:4). In antithetical parallelism a second thought is set in contrast with the first one, often with a "but" connective (e.g., Ps 1:6). In synthetic parallelism the original thought is developed further in the remainder (e.g., Ps 1:2). Within this basic parallelism, Hebrew poetry also liberally employs most of the literary devices common to most poetry – e.g., repetition, inverted arrangement, climax, exaggeration, personification and plays on words and sounds – and occasionally even rhyming.

Some Psalms have titles/ superscriptions; some have none. They are not part of the original Hebrew text, but only appear perhaps as late as the 2nd century B.C. They are printed in only some translations, often in smaller print or italics. Many of them traditionally associate the Psalm with some person or group, and sometimes even with some particular occasion. That person or group may or may not be referred to as its author, because phrases like "A Psalm of David" are quite ambiguous in Hebrew. Some psalm titles have what appear to be musical notations, which are difficult to interpret today. Some of these may even be subscriptions rather than superscriptions, and thus apply to the preceding psalm (Hb 3:19).

The psalms seem to have been originally composed throughout Israel's history from the Exodus through the Exile and perhaps beyond, and reworked later to fit new circumstances. The first psalm and the last one or few psalms may even have been especially composed as introduction and conclusion for the entire collection. The LXX [Septuagint] Greek translation of the 2nd century B.C. adds a 151st psalm [based on an Hebrew original extant in the Dead Sea scrolls] which it acknowledges to be "outside the number". The final Hebrew edition of the Psalter was divided into five books, each of which ends with a doxology and usually an "Amen" or two: Books One (1-41), Two (42-72); Three (73-89); Four (90-106); Five (107-150). This may possibly indicate that five separate preexisting hymn books were now combined without alteration into one comprehensive psalter, even if that meant including two very similar versions of essentially the same psalm (e.g., Ps 14 & 53), as do even some modern hymnals to serve a wider public.

1. If Psalms 46-48 were songs of Zion sung by the exiles for their mutual comfort and encouragement (Ps 137:3f), what does each one affirm about (a) Yahweh, (b) the city of Zion, (c) God's people, (d) the world of the exiles and (e) the exiles' hopes?
2. What connection can you see between Ps 46 and Ezekiel's vision of Yahweh's ideal city (Ek 47:1f; 48:35)? What might this suggest about the possible meaning of these psalms for the exiles?
3. Although Ps 76 may well have been written earlier to celebrate Yahweh's deliverance of Jerusalem from the Assyrian siege in 701 B.C. (Is 36:1-37:37; 2K 18:13-19:37; 2 Ch 32:1-23), what comfort might it have been to the exiles in Babylon in the 6th century B.C.? What does it affirm and advise about Yahweh that is still relevant to God's people today?
4. Can you see from Ps 87 why Christians of all ages, like John Newton (1725-1807 A.D.), who wrote the hymn "Glorious things of Thee are spoken", have viewed the church of Jesus Christ as the city of God, and, thus, have found these psalms of Zion particularly relevant to themselves? How relevant are they to you as a Christian?
5. How do psalms like these help you to praise Yahweh, your God, joyfully? Which of them inspires your praise the most? Why? Which of the possible meanings of the term "Selah" — pause, crescendo, musical interlude — would best facilitate your singing Yahweh's praise [Hebrew = Hallelujah!]? Why?

1. What particular characteristics and commitments of Yahweh, celebrated in Ps 89:1-37, precipitate the faith crisis described in Ps 89:38-45? How specifically honest does the psalmist dare to be? When have you ever felt God has let you down or proven untrustworthy? Do you dare to complain, question or ask about this with him? What reasons would you give, based upon your understanding of his character and commitments? Why do you think it is that Christian hymns upon this psalm focus only on the first section, and perhaps v. 52? How would you express the contents of vv. 46-51 in your own words? After that praying that, could you or the psalmist rightly conclude with v. 52? Or should v. 52 be viewed as an editorial doxology, ending the 3rd book of psalms properly on the right note?
2. In what ways do the great credo of Ex 34:6, Yahweh's dynastic covenant with David (2 S 7:8-16) and the tragic ending of the Davidic dynasty in the fall of Jerusalem (2 K 25:1-21; 2 Ch 36:15-21), ground Ps 89 historically? Does the psalm present fairly the conditions and promises of Yahweh's covenant with David and his dynasty? Could Jr 33:14-26 be viewed as God's answer to this challenge to his covenantal faithfulness? Or is the real answer revealed much earlier in Is 9:6f (Lk 2:11; Mt 28:18)?
3. What crisis of faith for the exiles does Ps 74 express? Where are there parallel situations for God's people today? What arguments and requests made by the psalmist could a Christian employ while praying for his own congregation or the church?
4. Why do you think that later Jews traditionally prescribed Ps 79 for use in commemoration of the destruction of both Solomon's temple in 586 B.C. and Herod's temple in 70 A.D.? Who is blamed in the psalm for the disaster(s)? What is Yahweh being asked to do and to whom? On what grounds for each? Should Christians ever pray the equivalent of this prayer (Mt 5:38-48; 6:12, 14; Mk 11:25; Ro 12:19-21)? How so?
5. Do you ever feel like crying out "How long, O Yahweh?" (Ps 89:46; 74:10; 79:5)? What were the circumstances? Did you dare to cry it out directly to God? Why should you (Ps 22-24)? How does the more personal prayer of Ps 13 show the way such questions can be compatible with continuing faith in God? Could you use Ps 13 as your own prayer? How did Jesus' two prayers on the cross (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34; Lk 23:46) reflect this psalm as well as quoting Ps 22:1, 24ff and 31:5?

1. How are praising God, thanking him and remembering one's relationship with him, all interrelated in Ps 106? How are these three components connected in your prayers and worship? How similar are your ways of connecting them to those exhibited in this psalm? Why might that be?
2. How might Ps 106's review of Israel's sinful past strengthen the faith of the despairing Jewish exiles in Babylon? What are the psalmist's prayer requests? On what are they grounded? How might this psalm be relevant to Christians and their congregations today?
3. How might the doxology ending the 4th book of the psalms (106:48) be employed in your congregation's worship? How could you use doxologies like this in your personal prayer life? How do you use the commonest short Old Testament doxology, "Praise the LORD!" [Heb = "Hallelujah!"]?
4. How does Ps 102 fit the closing days of the exile? Can you in any way identify with the exiles' present distress (vv. 1-11)? Do any of the similes and metaphors here express how you sometimes feel? Can you appreciate the captives' vision of hope for a restored Zion (vv. 12-27)? What is your Christian hope? What has the character of Yahweh (vv. 23-28) got to do with their hope? Is this also a significant basis for your Christian hope (2 Co 4:7-11, 17f)? What other divine grounds for hope do Christians have? What evidence of the roots of that is found in this psalm?
5. In what ways can you identify with those, like the Babylonian exiles, who have felt alienated from Yahweh's blessings for many years? Can this be true of Christian denominations and congregations, as well as of individuals? What continues to give you hope that Yahweh has really not forgotten you? What do you think Daniel, who witnessed Cyrus' decree officially ending the forced exile (2 Ch 36:22f; Dn 10:1), thought of all this?

INTRODUCTION TO EZRA AND NEHEMIAH.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah continue the history of the Israelites/ Judeans in Palestine for about a century of Persian rule from the 1st year of the reign of Cyrus of Persia [538 B.C.] to shortly after the 32nd year of the reign of Artaxerxes I [432 B.C.]. The present two books were originally one book based upon the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah plus public documents, letters and archival lists, only roughly arranged in chronological order. Although most of the joint book is in Hebrew, Ez 4:8-6:18 is in the sister language of Aramaic, which was the *lingua franca* of that part of the Persian Empire.

Judah in this period of its restoration was but a small part of the vast Persian satrap/ province of "Beyond the River" stretching from the Euphrates River in the northeast to the northeastern border of Egypt, which itself was also part of the vaster Persian Empire that stretched from Libya to India and from Egypt to Macedonia. Palestine's political and religious life depended upon Persian power and policy. Cyrus I, the founder of the Persian Empire, was an enlightened ruler whose general policy was to permit peoples that had been deported by the Assyrians and Babylonians to return to their homelands. He carefully respected the religious sensibilities of his many subject peoples, governed by permitting considerable local autonomy, but kept firm control through his army and a complex system of government and communication.

In keeping with this general policy, in 538 B.C. Cyrus permitted a group of exiles to return to Judea, and even provided funds for the rebuilding of their God's temple. Throughout this century Judah remained relatively untouched by the major historical movements and events in the Persian Empire, including the conquest of Egypt [525 B.C.], the destruction of Babylon [482 B.C.] and the attempts to invade Greece [479-449 B.C.]. The Persian Empire fell to Alexander the Great of Macedonia and Greece in 331 B.C.

The events recorded in Ezra-Nehemiah gather around three periods:

- (a) Ez 1-6 (except 4:6-23) deals with the time from the first wave of Jewish exiles returning [538 B.C.] under Zerubbabel, grandson of king Jehoiachin (Ez 3:2; Hg 1:1; Mt 1:12), and high priest Jeshua in response to Cyrus I's decree [538 B.C.] until the completion of the 2nd temple [516 B.C.].
- (b) Ez 4:6-23 and 7-10 describe the period of the return of the second large wave of exiles under Ezra the priest and scribe [458 B.C.] and the first part of Ezra's ministry in Jerusalem.
- (c) Ne 1-13 treats the two terms of Nehemiah's governing of Judah, his rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls and his joint ministry with Ezra.

Both Ezra and Nehemiah were men raised up by Yahweh to render invaluable service at a critical time in Judah's history. Ezra was an Aaronic priest and scribe, a man of outstanding piety, a diligent student and capable teacher of God's law and a zealous reformer of God's people. He is traditionally credited by Jews with giving the Mosaic law the place of supreme authority in the life of God's people and also with the tasks of preserving, editing and teaching the Old Testament scriptures. Later Judaism considered him the founder of the long tradition of rabbis/ teachers who guarded and interpreted the extensive oral law of God, which was also linked to Ezra. Nehemiah was a Jewish layman and patriot who served in the Persian public service, first in court, then as governor of Judah for two terms. He combined watchfulness, trustworthiness, prayerfulness and energetic activity, all in dependence upon Yahweh. Together the two leaders made a powerful clergy-laity ministry team.

ANALYSIS OF EZRA

- 1:1-6:22 First return of exiles under Zerubbabel [437-516 B.C.]:
 - 1:1-2:70 Return to rebuild the temple;
 - 3:1-13 Altar erected and foundations laid;
 - 4:1-24 Opposition halts the work twice:
 - 4:1-5 & 24 Halting of work on the temple [in the reigns of Cyrus 1 and Darius 1],
 - 4:6-23 Halting of work on the walls of Jerusalem [in the reign of Artaxerxes I];
 - 5:1-27 Resumption of work on the temple, promoted by Haggai and Zechariah;
 - 6:1-22 Completion of the temple.
- 7:1-10:44 Memoirs of Ezra: Part One [458 B.C. ff]:
 - 7:1-8:36 Ezra's journey to Jerusalem;
 - 9:1-10:44 Ezra's reforms.

ANALYSIS OF NEHEMIAH

- 1:1-7:53a Memoirs of Nehemiah: First Governorship [445 B.C. ff]:
 - 1:1-11 Distress of Jews in Jerusalem and Nehemiah's prayer;
 - 2:1-10 Artaxerxes I sends Nehemiah to Jerusalem;
 - 2:11-20 Nehemiah stirs up the people to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem;
 - 3:1-32 Apportionment of the work;
 - 4:1-6:14 Nehemiah directs the rebuilding in spite of opposition and difficulties;
 - 6:15-7:4 Completion of the walls and provision for protection;
 - 7:5-53a Record of the register of those who had earlier returned with Zerubbabel.
- 7:53b-10:39 Memoirs of Ezra: Part Two:
 - 7:53b-8:18 Public reading; exposition of the law; celebrate Feast of Tabernacles.
 - 9:1-38 Corporate repentance and confession;
 - 10:1-39 Covenant to obey God's law.
- 11:1-13:31 Memoirs of Nehemiah: Second Governorship [432 B.C. ff]:
 - 11:1-12:26 Lists of those dwelling in Jerusalem;
 - 12:27-47 Dedication of the city's walls and provision for regular temple worship;
 - 13:1-31 Nehemiah's reforms.

1. What do you think of Yahweh's use of political means in 538 B.C. to fulfill the prophecies of Is 44:28-45:3, 12f and Jr 29:10? How does God use the general political and economic policies of today's governments to accomplish his purposes? How orthodox did Cyrus's theology and faith need to be in order to act as Yahweh's agent, even his Messiah [Hebrew = "Anointed One"] (Ez 1:1-4, 70)? Does this suggest that Christians should look to secular and even pagan governments to help solve some of their problems? Which problems?
2. How do you imagine the 900 mile/ 1440 kilometre trek of about 50,000 Jews in the first major wave of returning exiles in 537 B.C.? What logistics, concerns and feelings would likely have been involved in this great physical and spiritual journey? To what extent could it be correctly described as a "new exodus" (Is 40:3-5; 41:17-19; 49:9-13)? How do you think it compares with the 20th century A.D. return of Jews to Palestine to found modern Israel as their homeland?
3. Why was registration of Jews by families or towns at this time so important that it was recorded twice in what was originally one book (Ez 2:1-70 & Ne 7:5-73a)? Does your family have a genealogical record? What makes it important to you? Do you ever wish you had a more complete record? Why? How important to you is it that Yahweh keeps a complete record of all the members of his people (Dn 12:1-3; Lk 10:20; Ph 4:3; Rv 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27)? How much more important is that registry to you than any human one? How do you think you get on God's list? What do you think is the relationship between God's register and congregational membership lists? How so?
4. Why should free will offerings to God's work (Ez 1:4, 6; 3:5; Ne 7:68; Ex 35:5-29; 36:3) be according to each one's ability (Ez 2:69; 2 Co 8:12)? Should contributions in kind and skill also be welcomed (Es 4:1; Ex 35:10, 26; 36:2)? To what other projects besides buildings could they apply? How could this be organised today? How is this practical voluntary giving and receiving of gifts related to the gifts and ministries of every member of Christ's body, the church (1 Co 12:14-27; Ep 4:16)?
5. How important is it to you to try to reconcile the detailed numbers of people, gifts, etc., given in the various accounts of what seems to be the same events (e.g., Ez 2:64-69 & Ne 7:66-72)? Would trying to sort out the exact chronology of Ezra's and Nehemiah's memoirs (e.g., where Ez 4:6-23 fits in) be more important? How so?

1. What were the stages of the rebuilding of the 2nd temple in Jerusalem from 537 to 516 B.C.? Why did it take so long to build such an unpretentious building? What factors contributed to its successful completion? In what ways could this process be viewed as an allegory of the task of spiritually building up a Christian congregation today (1 Co 3:9-17; Ep 2:19-22; 4:7, 11-16; 1 P 2:4f)? How can you contribute to that upbuilding process in your congregation? When will it end?
2. What can Christians learn from the Jews of the restoration about joyfully celebrating every stage of God's constructive work in our midst (Ez 3:1, 4, 10f; 6:16-18, 19-22; Jr 33:10f; Ps 106:1-3)? What has your congregation of God's people got to celebrate right now? How can you properly celebrate Yahweh's present work in your midst while bemoaning the loss of the great days of your past golden age (Ez 3:12f)? What would be a better way to remember your past greatness and achievements (Ez 3:10f; 1 Ch 16:7-12, 34)?
3. Why do you think the Jewish leaders rejected the help offered by the neighbouring Samaritans, who were then the majority inhabitants of the area (Ez 4:1-4; 2 K 17:24-41; Jn 4:9)? What reveals the Samaritan's hidden agenda? What criteria guiding Zerubbabel's decision, might help Christian leaders today determine the degree to which they should co-operate with others in the doing of God's work (Lk 9:49f; 11:23; 2 Co 6:14-18; Ph 1:14-19)?
4. What political maneuver did those opposed to the temple's reconstruction employ to halt it (Ez 4:5)? What might we today call that tactic? Is it a tactic that Christians should also use to advance their spiritual causes? Why?
5. In the long run, what counter tactic was employed by the Jews to recommence the temple's reconstruction and continue it as long as was politically possible (5:1f)? Why do you think this political tactic worked not only short-term but also long-term? How important is it to have your facts in order before you appeal so publicly to your political establishment?
6. What do you make of the apparent historical errors in the king references of Ez 4:6 and 6:14 and especially 6:22?

INTRODUCTION TO HAGGAI.

The Prophets Haggai and Zechariah are mentioned together in Ez 5:1 as prophesying at the same time in Jerusalem. The exact dates of Haggai's prophecy are given as in the 2nd year of Darius, king of Persia, i.e., 520 B.C. from August 29 to December 18. However, very little is known of Haggai himself. Some later Jews thought of him as a young man who had returned with Zerubbabel in the first wave of exiles in 537 B.C. His name suggests that he might have been born on one of the great Jewish festival days [Heb. "hag" = festival].

The first company of returning exiles had immediately set about the task of rebuilding the temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem. However, Samaritan opposition and intrigue had proven to be too strong, therefore the work had ceased (Ez 4:1-5, 24). Thereafter, the people had become preoccupied with their own concerns, rationalizing that "the time had not yet come to rebuild the house of Yahweh" (Hg 1:2) and that the new temple seemed to be "nothing in comparison" to the glory of Solomon's great one (Hg 2:3; Ez 3:12f).

Haggai's prophecies consist of four utterances containing repeated promises of God's presence and blessing, if only they would apply themselves to the task of rebuilding his house immediately. Furthermore, there is really no other hope but Yahweh in the time of trouble and judgement when God himself will shake all things and reveal the worthlessness of every other boasted confidence. Haggai also claims that rebuilding the temple was in some way related to the coming redeemer of God's people. The rebuilding of the temple was an indication both that God's promised redemption of his people hadn't been forgotten and also a sign of the people's faith in God's promise.

ANALYSIS OF HAGGAI

- 1:1-15 First Utterance: Recommence the building of the temple.
- 2:1-9 Second Utterance: God will prosper the work.
- 2:10-19 Third Utterance: A dialogue with Yahweh about the uncleanness of the people and their offerings.
- 2:20-23 Fourth Utterance: The overthrow of the world's kingdoms and the exaltation of Yahweh's servant.

1. Why might the returned exiles have said that it wasn't the right time to rebuild Yahweh's temple? How does God, through Haggai, counter their argument? How might Jesus have had this in mind in giving his advice in Mt 6:23-34? How closely is basic economic prosperity for God's people tied to their pursuing his priorities?
2. How essential is the stirring and strengthening of your and your leaders' spirits by Yahweh's own Spirit, for motivating energetic participation in Yahweh's enterprises (Hg 1:14; 2:4)? Is that a significant aspect of Yahweh being "with you" too (Hg 1:13)? Is there, then, a divine-human partnership in the doing of Yahweh's work generally (Ps 8), especially by his special covenant people (Ex 19:4-6; Hg 2:5; 1 Jn 2:29; 4:7)?
3. What do Hg 2:3 & 7-9 teach about properly estimating glory? What does Yahweh promise his people? What might you and your congregation learn from this?
4. Why does it seem that from a religious point of view that ritual holiness is more easily polluted than spread (2:11-17)? Is this also true of the holiness of obedience to Yahweh's call (2:18f) Why?
5. How is what Yahweh wants to do with his people in the present connected with what he plans to do some time later (2:6-9, 20-23)? In what ways should that be an encouragement to God's people and their leaders? How does what Yahweh plans to do with his world motivate you and your congregation these days?
6. Why does Haggai make such an issue (a) of the precise dates of his utterances and (b) of the people's giving thought to how they have fared (1:5, 7; 2:15, 18)? How do these emphases fit with Yahweh's questions and answers (e.g., 1:9f & 2:18f)?

INTRODUCTION TO ZECHARIAH.

Zechariah began his ministry two months after Haggai's [October 27, 520 B.C.]. Yet nothing is known of him personally, other than the meaning of his very popular Hebrew name, "Yah[weh] has remembered". The two parts of his book are so different in character that biblical scholars have argued either that they were written by two different authors or that they were written many years apart by the same author. Yet both parts are forms of apocalyptic literature, picturing the future in light of present historical situations. Zechariah remains one of the most difficult of biblical books to interpret today, both because of his symbolism and also because so little is known about the contemporary circumstances that occasioned his visions and oracles.

The first part of the book seems mainly concerned with the rebuilding of Yahweh's temple, containing as it does Zechariah's words of encouragement and warning to the people and their rulers. Following this are eight night visions that seem to supply answers to doubts and questions of the people. It closes with the prophet's reply to an enquiry from the residents of Bethel, about their continuing to fast in memory of the calamities that had overtaken them in the previous century.

The second part of the book consists of two oracles about war between the heathen world and God's people. The first oracle speaks of a judgement in which the gentiles' world power over Israel is finally broken and Israel is given strength to overcome her enemies. The second is concerned with a judgement in which Israel herself is sifted and purged in a great final conflict with the nations, in order that she may be transformed into Yahweh's holy nation.

Both sections of the book seem also to foreshadow the appearance of Zion's messianic king, declaring both his rejection and his universal dominion. Therefore, Zechariah is frequently quoted in the New Testament in reference either to the first or to the second advent/ coming of Jesus as God's Christ/ Messiah.

ANALYSIS OF ZECHARIAH

- 1:1-8:23 Part One:
- 1:1-6 A call to pay heed to God's word;
 - 1:7-6:8 Eight night visions:
 - 1:7-17 An angel of Yahweh among the myrtle trees,
 - 1:18-21 Four horns and four smiths/craftsmen,
 - 2:1-13 A man with the measuring line,
 - 3:1-10 Joshua, the high priest;
 - 4:1-14 A golden lampstand and two olive trees,
 - 5:1-4 A flying scroll,
 - 5:5-11 An ephah/ barrel and a woman,
 - 6:1-8 Four chariots;
 - 6:9-15 The crowning of Joshua;
 - 7:1-8:23 Reply to the deputation from Bethel:
 - 7:1-14 Yahweh's perspective on fasting and lamenting,
 - 8:1-23 The practical results of Yahweh's promise.
- 9:1-14:21 Part Two:
- 9:1-11:17 Oracle One: towards the end of the age:
 - 9:1-17 A gentile conqueror and Zion's king:
 - 9:1-8 Yahweh, Lord of hostile cities,
 - 9:9-17 The coming of Zion's king,
 - 10:1-12 What the shepherd king brings to his people,
 - 11:1-17 The consequences of rejecting the true shepherd;
 - 12:1-14:21 Oracle Two: at the end of the age:
 - 12:1-9 The deliverance of Jerusalem,
 - 12:10-13:6 The penance and purification of the people,
 - 13:7-9 Smite the shepherd and scatter the people,
 - 14:1-21 The messiah's appearance and kingdom.

1. According to 1:2-6, what is the way to deal with Yahweh's justified anger against you? Why (MI 16f)? What, therefore, has repentance/ returning to do with reconciliation with God (MI 3:6f)? How also does God's revelation facilitate humans and God returning to each other? How does Yahweh's revealed word, therefore, accomplish the purpose for which he sends it (Is 55:11)?
2. What is the basic message in each of the eight night visions (Zc 1:7-6:8)? What question(s) of the people might each vision answer? What guidance or encouragement might they have brought you if you had been one of the recently returned Jewish exiles? Why do you think Zechariah and Haggai (Hg 1:2, 5, 7, 9, 14; 2:4, 7, 9, 11, 23) constantly refers to God as "Yahweh of hosts/ heavenly forces"? Which of the messages of the visions might help you in your present circumstances or quandaries? How so?
3. How much of what is said here about and to God's people and city could apply to God's people today? How are God's character, his ways of working and his purposes for his people the same or different today? What does that mean to you? How are Satan's character, ways of working and purposes contrasted with Yahweh's? What might that mean to you (Mt 6:13; 1 P 5:8; 2 P 3:9; Jn 3:16)?
4. According to 2:11, to what extent should God's people be defined racially or ethnically? How inclusive does Yahweh want his people to become in this respect (Mt 28:19; Ga 3:28; 1 Co 12:13; Cl 3:11)?
5. How well might remembering some of the imagery of Am 4:11; 7:7; Is 28:16f; 42:1; Jr 23:5 and 2 Ch 16:9 have helped the Judeans interpret parts of Zechariah's 3rd (2:1-13), 4th (3:1-10) and 5th (4:1-14) visions? With the help of 6:9-15, what might they have thought all this was referring to? Did history prove that correct? How so? How might these visions also portray a coming future Messiah? What resemblance can you see between the high priest Joshua and Jesus [Hebrew "Joshua" = Greek "Jesus"]?
6. What particularly memorable lines in this section (e.g., in Zc 2:5; 2:8; 2:10; 3:4; 4:6 & 4:10) might be just as relevant to some of God's people in many other ages and circumstances? Which are meaningful for you right now? Why?

1. What can Christians learn from Yahweh's view in ch. 7 of religious fastings and lamentations? How could adopting His perspective change your patterns of worship and spiritual discipleship (Mt 25:34-46; Ja 1:27)?
2. In ch. 8, what are the practical gracious results of Yahweh's promises? What responses by his people does Yahweh deem appropriate? How much like the New Testament does this sound (Ep 2:8-10; 4:16-32)? How might the surrounding peoples respond to all this (8:20-23)? What serious impact could this message have on Christians today? With what possible consequences? Why is truth so important?
3. In oracle one (9:1-11:17), how is the coming messianic king described with respect to: (a) his coming, (b) his character, (c) his program, (d) his achievements and (e) the benefits he brings to his people? Do the details in 9:10, 12 & 14 following after 9:9, help explain both the expectations many 1st century A.D. Jews had for their promised messiah and also their disappointment in Jesus of Nazareth? If Jesus is truly God's promised messiah, what remains still to be fulfilled by him at his second coming/ advent? Nevertheless, how much of this is already experienced by followers of Jesus as present spiritual blessings? How far have you entered into these possibilities?
4. In ch. 9, what is promised by Yahweh for his people? Why will this happen to them (10:6)? How relevant is this to his people today? Why?
5. How many shepherds and types of shepherds seem to be talked about in ch. 11? How do they differ? How are related to Yahweh the Good Shepherd of Ps 23, Jr 23 and Ek 34? How much of this does Jesus seem to express in his discourse on his own shepherding (Jn 10:1-18)? Could Peter too have all of this in mind in his description of the pastoral role of church elders under the Chief Shepherd (1 P 5:1-4)? What connections could there have been for New Testament writers and readers (a) between Zc 11:10 and Jn 10:16 (Is 56:8) and (b) between Zc 11:12f and Mt 26:14-16; 27:3-10 & Ac 1:14-16?

1. According to 12:1-9, what is to be the secret of Jerusalem's survival when surrounded by enemies? How has the Christian a similar hope of overcoming all the opposing forces of evil (Ps 27:1-6; 1 Jo 4:4; 5:4)?
2. What can be learned from 12:10-13:6 about the relationships between guilt, mourning, repentance, forgiveness and perfection? What of this have you experienced thus far?
3. Is what is said in 13:7-9 about Yahweh's shepherd/ associate compatible with what is said of Yahweh's suffering servant in Is 53? How much of this does Jesus apply to himself for his disciples in Mt 26:31 and Mk 14:27?
4. Do Zc 13:9 and 14:9 encourage God's people to call him "Yahweh" as their covenant making and keeping God? Do you use His personal name frequently? Why? How does 14:9 along with Is 45:23 help Christians understand what Ph 2:9-11 says is to be universally acknowledged by confessing that the Christ/ Messiah Jesus [// Hebrew "Joshua" = "Ya[wehl saves"] is Lord [Sovereign/ Yahweh] (Ro 12:4; I Co 12:3)?
5. According to ch. 14, what will the great Day of Yahweh mean (a) for Jerusalem, the Holy City, and (b) for her enemies? How does this fit with other biblical visions of the future Jerusalem (Ek 47; Lk 21:5-28; Rv 21:1-10, 22-27; 22:1-5)? How significant is this to you? How might Zc 14:4 help us understand how the river of Ek 47's vision could flow straight east from Jerusalem into the rift valley of the Jordan river and the Dead Sea? How might 14:10 also help us make sense of the north-south layout of east-west strips of the Israelite tribes in Ek 48's vision the new land of Israel?
6. Looking back over the book of Zechariah, can you see why it is both the hardest Old Testament book to interpret in modern times, and yet also so frequently quoted in the New Testament? What do you make of the following New Testament references to Zechariah?

Zc Verse	N.T. use	Zc Verse	N.T. use
1:6	Rv 10:7; 11:18	8:17	1 Co 13:5
2:6	Rv 21:15	9:9	Mt 21:5; Jn 12:15
2:10	Mt 24:31; Mk 13:27	9:11	Mt 26:28; Mk 14:24; Lk 22:20
2:14	Rv 21:3		1 Co 11:25; He 13:20
3:1f	Rv 12:9; 20:2	11:12	Mk 26:15
3:2ff	Jd 9, 23	11:12f	Mt 27:9
4:3, 11-14	Rv 11:4	12:3 LXX	Lk 21:24; Rv 11:12
4:10	Rv 5:6	12:9	Rv 20:9
6:1-3	Rv 6:2	12:10	Jn 19:37
6:5	Rv 7:1	12:10ff	Mk 24:30; Rv 1:7
6:11ff	He 10:21	13:7	Mt 26:31; Mk 14:37
8:6 LXX	Mt 19:26; Mk 10:27	14:5	Rv 21:25
8:8	Rv 21:7	14:7	Rv 21:25
8:16	Ep 4:25	14:8	Rv 21:6; 22:1, 17

See *"The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge"* R.A. Torrey for more

INTRODUCTION TO ESTHER.

The book of Esther is a swift-moving and well-constructed story which should be read at one sitting. It concerns the marriage of a young Jewish heroine to a gentile Persian king/ emperor. When her people are threatened with genocide, she is called upon to try to save them at the risk of her own life. As the Jews throughout the Persian empire are saved from extermination, a strong undercurrent of Jewish patriotism and a sense of divine providence permeates the story. This deliverance provides the origin of the annual Jewish Feast of Purim [February-March], so named after the die [Hebrew = "pur" (Es 3:7; 9:24, 26)] which Haman cast to select the most propitious date for his pogrom against the Jews of the empire.

Its author and date of composition cannot be identified with any certainty. However, the wealth of detail and local colour suggest that it was written in Persia not long after the recorded events had taken place. A Persian origin would also help to account for the long time it took for the book to be accepted as Scripture by Palestinian Jews. Not all Jews were happy with the new Feast of Purim, since it added to the long-established Mosaic cycle of feasts and, thus, seemed to call into question the all-sufficiency of God's revelation through Moses. They were probably also concerned that the book does not mention God even once, let alone use his covenant name, "Yahweh". The 107 extra verses in the 3rd century Septuagint Greek translation seem designed to make Esther's religious dimension more explicit. While eventually Esther came to be highly valued by Jewish rabbis, early Christians continued to debate its canonicity until the Council of Carthage in 397 A.D.

King Ahasuerus (Es 1:1; Ez 4:6) is usually identified with emperor Xerxes I [485-465 B.C.], whose campaign against Greece would fit into the four year gap specified between Es 1:3 and 2:16. The action takes place in Susa, one of the capitals of the Persian Empire. Chronologically this places the events some years before those recounted in Ez 4:7-23 and Ez 7:1; Ne 13:31, which relate to the following reign of Artaxerxes I [465-424 B.C.].

ANALYSIS OF ESTHER

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|---------|---|
| 1:1-22 | Queen Vashti is deposed for disobeying king Ahasuerus. |
| 2:1-20 | Esther, a young Jewess, is chosen to be the new queen. |
| 2:21-23 | Mordecai, her cousin and foster father, exposes a plot against the king's life. |
| 3:1-15 | Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman, the king's favourite, who plans a revenge pogrom on Jews. |
| 5:1-8 | The king receives Esther. |
| 5:9-14 | Haman schemes to secure Mordecai's death without delay. |
| 6:1-14 | The king makes Haman publicly honour Mordecai for earlier saving his life. |
| 7:1-10 | Esther's plea is granted and Haman is executed. |
| 8:1-17 | Mordecai is further honoured and an edict issued to allow the Jews to defend themselves. |
| 9:1-19 | The Jews take vengeance upon their enemies. |
| 9:20-32 | The Feast of Purim is instituted to commemorate this great deliverance. |
| 10:1-3 | Mordecai is given a position of great authority in the empire. |

1. What role did too much wine/ alcohol seem to play in the king's angry break with his queen, Vashti (1:7-12)? How are wine and anger again linked together later in the story (7:1-10)? What other factor was at least as important in determining Vashti's fate (1:13-22)? What can Christians today learn from the impact of these factors (Pr 20:1; Ep 5:18; Ro 13:13; 1 Co 5:10f; 1 P3:1-9)?
2. Besides personal provocations in Es 3:2-6 and 6:10-12, what perennial historical interaction between Mordecai's Jewish ancestors [especially Benjaminites descended from Kish, king Saul's father] and Haman's Amalakite ancestors [especially the Agagites descended from king Agag] probably contributed to Haman's determination to lynch Mordecai and have the empire's Jewish population exterminated (Gn 36:12, 16; Ex 17:8-13; Nu 14:43-45; 24:20; Dt 25:17-19; Jg 3:13; 6:3-5, 33; 7:12; 10:12; 1 S 15:2-33 ; 27:6; 30:1-20; 1 Ch 4:43)?
3. What are some of the dangers inherent in making human decisions, laws and policies irrevocable (Es 1:19; 4:8; Dn 6:8f, 12, 15; Ps 94:20f)? What could you, your congregation and the church more generally learn from this? How do you respond when you run up against such intransigent, traditional policies among God's people?
4. How is God's providence at work in Esther's and Mordecai's life (Gn 45:5-8; 50:20-21; Is 65:24; Ro 8:28)? How free was she to co-operate or not? Why? How might what Mordecai said to Esther in Es 4:14 relate to you in your present situation?
5. How would you describe the dynamics of the on-going relationship between Esther and Mordecai? What could Christian families profitably learn from their relationship?
6. What might it have meant for a young Jewish woman to have her name changed from "Hadassah" [Hebrew = "the myrtle"] to "Esther" [Persian = "a star"] (Es 2:7)? In how many ways did she indeed become a star? How many women today named "Esther" are inspired by the biblical Esther's beauty, character and behaviour?

1. What can you learn from both Haman and his king about the consequences of very human values and attitudes? How much has human civilization progressed in the last twenty-five centuries?
2. What are the differences between Esther's and Mordecai's patterns of public witness to their relationship to Yahweh and his people? How effective was each one's approach in the Persian capital and for Daniel and his friends earlier in the Babylonian capital? Which way is best for serving Yahweh in the public life of a secular, or even pagan, society today? What can you learn from this comparison, even if you are not called to such a public ministry? What supports should you and other Christians provide for Christians called to such public life (1 Ti 2:1f)?
3. What do you value most about Mordecai's and Esther's characters? Why? What was the source of their moral strength? What is the source of yours?
4. Why do you think the retaliating Jews did not take advantage of the official permission to plunder the property of their enemies (Es 8:11; 9:10, 16)? Could their motive have been similar to that of Abram in Gn 14:21-24? What might you have done in their situation? How so?
5. What dates do you or your congregation celebrate in joyful recollection of when you or God's people have obtained relief from your enemies? What do you make of how Jews were to celebrate Purim? What could your family and your congregation learn from them?
6. In spite of no explicit mention of God or his name Yahweh in the Hebrew book of Esther, what is revealed about him in the story it tells? How relevant is this to God's people in all ages, even today?

INTRODUCTION TO MALACHI.

Malachi, the last of the Old Testament's prophets, was a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah in Jerusalem. He attacks the evils which arose in Jerusalem after the temple had been rebuilt and its services reestablished for some time.

Since the name Malachi means "My messenger", as in 3:1, it may not even be a personal name at all. The 3rd century Greek Septuagint [LXX] translation didn't read it as a proper name. One ancient Jewish tradition identifies the messenger with Ezra, the scribe, but modern scholars are far from being in agreement about this possibility. Although some biblical books are indeed anonymous, the other prophetic ones are attributed to a named prophet of Yahweh. Why not, therefore, this last one too?

Each section of the book, except the last one, follows a question-and-answer format. This dialogical pattern is more than stylistic, for it serves to bring out the people's contentious spirit, which questions previously accepted beliefs and practices. The device is also used to present a theodicy, that is, a justifying of God's ways with humanity. Malachi forges a strong link between God's law and his gospel by combining a severe insistence on the necessity of purity and a sincere heart with a sure promise of the coming of a deliverer to those who revere Yahweh.

Unique to Malachi are two themes: the idea of a book of remembrance (3:16) and the naming of Elijah (4:5) as the forerunner (Is 40:3) or messenger (MI 3:1) for Yahweh's advent/coming. Although both the angel of Yahweh (Lk 1:17) and Jesus himself (Mt 11:13f; Mk 9:1-6, 11-13, ; Lk 7:26-28) identified John the Baptist with this Elijah figure, Jews to this day during their annual Passover celebrations still await his advent. Closing the Old Testament prophetic tradition on this note of expectation, suggests that Yahweh's revelation is incomplete, in spite of the great and abiding value of the Mosaic law and its many prophetic advocates and interpreters.

ANALYSIS OF MALACHI

- 1:1 Superscription.
- 1:2-5 Yahweh's love for Israel illustrated.
- 1:6-2:9 The sins of the priests.
- 2:10-16 The sins of the people.
- 2:17-3:5 Yahweh will come both to judge and to purify.
- 3:6-12 How to give practical expression to repentance.
- 3:13-4:3 Yahweh's dealings with both righteous and wicked people.
- 4:4-6 Moses and Elijah in God's future economy.

1. What questions asked by God's people, according to Malachi, have you also asked? How relevant to you are Yahweh's answers to them? What further issues do these answers raise for you? Where might you find answers to these further questions? How well do you find seeking answers to questions helps you study the Bible and even deepen your relationship with God? Does the zetetic [question-driven] approach of *Hiking Through the Bible* do the same for you?
2. What sins of the priests are exposed in ch. 1 (Dt 17:1)? What attitude towards God is expressed? Are these the same sins as those in 2:1-9? What did Yahweh's ancient covenant with Levi involve (Ex 32:25-29; Dt 33:8-10)? What was Jesus' evaluation of the scribes, the equivalent Jewish teachers of the Mosaic law in his day (Lk 11:42, 45f, 52)? How might all this apply to Christian leaders today?
3. Throughout his book, how does Malachi picture the ways of the wicked in contrast with those of the righteous? What is the heart of their differences according to 3:16-18? How does Yahweh deal with each group? What are their respective ends (4:1f)? Nevertheless, what about Yahweh's character and purpose makes changing groups and their respective destinies possible (3:1, 3-7; 4:5f; Jr 18:7, 11; Ek 18:21-23, 27f; 30-32; 2 P 3:9; Lk 19:5-10)? In this context, should Mt 3:6 be taken as teaching that Yahweh is changeless in every respect? What does this mean to you?
4. What might 2:14-16 say to Christian husbands today? Do you view marriage as a three-person covenant including God as the senior partner? How important to you is companionship in marriage? What is Yahweh's opinion of divorce? Do you share it? Why?
5. Does 3:8-12 teach, as some Christians seem to claim, that tithing is a divinely guaranteed financial investment plan for God's people in all times and places? What is said about this economic strategy in the New Testament (Lk 11:42; 18:11-14; 21:1-4; 2 Co 8:1-15; 9:6-15; He 7:5-10)? Nevertheless, what is said about wealth by Jesus (Mt 19:21-24; Mk 12:41-44; Lk 5:27f; 6:35, 38; 9:23-25; 12:15, 20f; 16:13)?
6. According to Malachi, what will characterize the coming Day of Yahweh (3:1-5, 16-18; 4:1-6)? How important is it to remember that God keeps a "book of remembrance"? What seems to be recorded in that book? How relevant might that be to you? How might that book relate to the two sets of books opened at the last judgement (Rv 20:11-15)?
7. With what hopes and fears did this leave the people of God for the next four and a half centuries when no more prophets spoke from God? How would you have faced such a future? What difference does the further divine revelation in Jesus and the New Testament make for your view of the future?

1. Who was Ezra (Ez 7:1-6)? What sort of relationship did he have with Yahweh? What was the basis of that relationship? How did he put his faith into practice? What could Christian leaders today learn from him? Would you want him for one of your leaders? Why?
2. What are the differences in the circumstances and subject matter of three recorded decrees concerning Jerusalem issued by king Artaxerxes I of Persia: the first one in 464/3 B.C. (Ez 4:17-23) and the second (7:13-26) and third (7:21-24) ones in 458 B.C.? How are they compatible? Does the king show any sign of having changed his mind about rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem by 458 B.C.? Nevertheless, how much clearer had the king's understanding become by then, both of the situation in Judah and of Yahweh, the God of the Jews? What role might Ezra have played in clarifying such matters for the king? What accounts for the king's remaining practical and theoretical misconceptions? How much better understanding of the true and living God, Yahweh, do rulers today seem to have? Why? How might they become better informed? What might this imply for Christians today?
3. What range of people went back to Judah with Ezra in the second stage of the exodus in 458 B.C.? Why do you think it was so important to record so many details and names (Ez 8:2-20)? Who might have valued such details in later years?
4. How careful was Ezra's planning and supervision of the four-month month journey to Jerusalem? Why, however, didn't he employ the troops that the king had offered to protect the travelers and their valuable possessions from ambush? How important are insurance policies to Christians that you know? Why?
5. How had the descendants of the first wave of returning exiles [437 B.C.], grievously sinned (Dt 7:1-4)? Why was this so serious (Ex 34:12-16)? In what respects should the "reconquest" of the land of Canaan by successive waves of returning Jews after the exile, be very careful not repeat the mistakes of the first conquest under Joshua (Js 23:12f; Jg 1 & 2)? Who seemed to be the greatest offenders this time? Are similar sins possible for Christians today (2 Co 6:14-7:1)? Should Christians follow the same policy advocated by Ezra (1 Co 7:12-17)? Did even such a radical policy solve all the problems of God's people's relating to gentiles (Ne 6:17-19; 13:4f, 7-9, 23-28)? Why do you think that detailed lists, both of the covenant signatories and of those opposed, are recorded here? Does your congregation also keep detailed records of its important decisions, including the issues involved, the reasons for policies being adopted and a record of those supporting and opposing them? For what purposes? How accessible should such information be? Why?

1. What do Nehemiah's first two prayers (Ne 1:5-11 & 2:4) reveal about: (a) his attitude to Yahweh, (b) his relationship to him, (c) his relationship to his own people, (d) his knowledge of the scriptures, (e) his grounds for expecting a positive answer to his prayers, (f) his prayer requests and (g) when to pray? What can you learn from this about praying for yourself and others?
2. Why was it prudent to take a military escort on Nehemiah's particular mission in 445/444 B.C. (Ne 2:9f; Ez 4:23)? How wisely does Nehemiah begin his leadership role in Jerusalem? What of this is relevant to your particular role as a leader among God's people today?
3. What can we, as functional members of Christ's body, God's church, learn from the partnership between God and his servant people (Ne 2:20) in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem (Ne 3; Ep 4:16; Ps 8)? What types of people were intimately involved together in this mammoth task?
4. Why do you think there is a record for posterity of who repaired which part of the city's wall? Is it significant that many families worked on a wall section very close to their own home? Might that also be God's intention for most Christians' ministries today? Why?
5. What roles did Nehemiah, the governor, play in rebuilding the walls of the city? What can Christian leaders learn from that?

1. How have you experienced that success in doing God's work in God's way often brings increasing opposition? What were the kinds of resistance that Nehemiah met? How did he deal with each type? Which of his practical approaches might be useful to you?
2. What were the complex interactions between prayer, the enemy's actions, God's workings and human contributions during the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall (2:17-4:22)? Is there any one element that predominates? How so? How might similar interactions and synergies/ workings together help us deal with the threats of terrorism today?
3. According to Ne 2:19f and ch. 6, what range of tactics were used to try to stop Nehemiah from completing the work that God had given him to oversee? In what ways are similar tactics employed against leaders of God's people today? Have you experienced any of them? How so? What can Christian leaders of all types learn from Nehemiah about coping with adversity and triumphing over it?
4. According to ch. 5, what fundamental social evil did Nehemiah have to correct (Ex 22:25; Lv 25:25-38; Dt 23:19f)? What makes such situations so evil in God's sight? How prevalent are similar evils today? How do they manifest themselves? How can we learn from Nehemiah how to deal with them (Ne 5:14-19)?
5. How might 6:15f encourage you in your own particular Christian leadership role, however humble it seems to be? How does this succeed in bringing glory to God (Mt 5:13-16)?

1. What important features of a common Christian worship service are represented in the event recorded in Ne 8:1-18? How well do you usually understand what is read publicly from the scriptures? How well are you helped to understand the readings (8:8)? How eager are you to gain greater insight into the scriptures and their practical implications for you (8:13-15)? Are you as quick as the people then were, in trying to put what is learned into practice (8:16-18)? How important is it to do so (Mt 7:24-27)? What important elements of their celebration contributed to the joy of their worship (8:10-12)? Does your public worship enable you to experience regularly that "the joy of Yahweh is your strength" (8:10)? Why? What further important elements of Christian worship are added in 9:1-3? Where do they fit in your public worship and private devotions?
2. How well does the Levites' prayer (9:5-38) elucidate Yahweh's nature as revealed in the great creed of Ex 34:6f? How well do your prayers express this view of God? How much of this prayer's sketch of how Yahweh's people had responded to his activities over the centuries, applies to God's people today? On what grounds do you pray and make requests to God? Should this ensure a positive answer? How so?
3. In what senses is it true that observing Yahweh's commands and ordinances enables a person to live (Ne 9:29; Lv 18:5; Dt 11:13-15; 30:15f, 19f; 32:46f; Ek 20:11, 13, 21; Ep 2:10)? In what senses is it also not as true as many religious people seem fervently to believe (Mt 19:16-22; Ro 3:20; 9:30-10:11; Ga 2:15f; 3:11f; Ep 2:8f)? What, then, is the role of God's laws in properly living with and for God, even for Christians (Mt 7:12; Ja 2:8; Ro 13:8-10; Ga 5:6, 13-16; Ep 2:10)?
4. How clearly does 9:26 & 30 present the purpose and empowerment of the ministry of Yahweh's Old Testament prophets? How closely do these apply also to New Testament prophets and to Christian prophets today? Who are they?
5. What elements of the signed pledges made by God's people and their leaders, according to ch. 10, are still relevant to Christians today? Was this re-commitment covenant a good idea at that time, (a) in light of the problems of ch. 5, (b) the public reading of the law, (c) the review of Israel's sorry responses to God and (d) their present state (9:36f)? What practical consequences did it have fairly soon (ch. 13)? Should Christians also make pledges to God? Why?
6. In what sense do Christians have a "house of our God" (10:39) as well as they themselves being the "house/ household of God" (1 Co 3:9, 16f; 1 Ti 3:15; 1 P 2:5) and also individually embody "the temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Co 6:19)? What are the dangers in confusing the three? How are they related?

1. Why do you think that most of the returned Jewish exiles preferred to live in smaller rural centres, rather than in the city of Jerusalem (Ne 11:1-3; 20, 25-30; 12:29)? Why do you live where you do? How does where you live delimit your opportunities to serve God? How might God try to induce you to live somewhere else (Gn 12:1-3; 13:8-18)? How might you respond (Gn 12:4f; 45:5-11; 50:1-25f)? Why? Are you now living where God wants you? How would you know that?
2. What evils did Nehemiah have to deal with in his second governorship (Ne 13:6f)? How could social conditions have degenerated so quickly after the recent reforms (Ez 9-10; Ne 9:2; 10:1-31; 13:1-5)? What similar evils all too readily plague God's people today? Who was held responsible then? Who is responsible now? Why? How helpful would Nehemiah's solutions be today? How so?
3. Is sacred music and its practitioners as important in your Christian congregation's celebrations as it seems to have been to Nehemiah and David (11:17,23; 12:8f, 24, 27, 31, 36, 38, 40-43, 45-47; 13:10f)? Why is sacred music so important (Ps 150)? How important is it to you?
4. What do you make of Nehemiah's many brief spontaneous prayers recorded in ch. 13? What might people learn about your relationship with God, if they could listen in on your spontaneous private prayers? Could this sort of praying be a significant part of what is meant by "praying without ceasing" (1 Th 5:17; Ep 6:18)? Do you practice it? Could you? How could you leave no gaps in your prayer life?
5. Do you think that Nehemiah and Ezra are good models for faithful lay and clerical ministries among and for God's people? How good were they as partners in ministry? What other exemplary clergy-lay partnerships in ministry can you think of in the Bible or elsewhere. What other public lay ministers can you recall in the Old Testament? At what cost did these lay people minister publicly? How true is this also for clerical ministers and their families? How relevant is all this to ministries in and through your congregation (Mt 19:27-29; Mk 10:28-30; Lk 18:28-30; Ep 4:11-16)? Even to your own ministries?

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Remember to write up your answer to the Comprehensive question on the basis of your notes.