

ST NINIAN'S POLLOKSHIELDS  
LENT 2, 2005  
OLD TESTAMENT BASICS (3)

ON HISTORY

So far in this series, which I've called Old Testament Basics, we've looked at the question, *why bother with the Old Testament* and, assuming that we should bother, have considered the prophets. Today I want to look at the material in the Old Testament which we can classify as history.

We all know that the OT tells the story of Israel from the days of the patriarch Abraham, maybe about 1600BC, until a few centuries before the time of Jesus. We are all familiar with the slavery in Egypt, the Exodus, the wanderings in the wilderness, the conquest and settlement of the land, the coming of the monarchy and the story of its kings in Israel and in Judah; maybe less familiar with the Exile to Babylon, the restoration of some of the exiles and the emergence of a Jewish community centred on law and temple which, as we read in the apocrypha, managed to survive the onslaught of its pagan rulers in the second century and established a priestly kingship of its own until conquest by the Romans in the 60s BC. We are also all familiar with some of the great figures of that history – Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Samson, Samuel, Saul, David, Solomon, Ruth and Naomi, Deborah, Elijah, and so on. We might be aware that most of this story is told in bits of Genesis, in Exodus, in 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Nehemiah and Ezra. We will certainly have our favourite stories from within this history: Joseph and the famine in Egypt; the Exodus; Moses and Aaron and the golden calf; David and Goliath; Elijah and Ahab; Solomon and Sheba, Daniel in the lion's den are only a very few possibilities. We may also know that this history has been the subject of

intensive historical-critical study, with the use of sources from the contemporary surrounding cultures and archaeological evidence, both to analyse the sources of the existing texts, to check out particular episodes and to enrich our understanding of the special story of Israel by seeing how it compares and contrasts with the history of the Ancient Near East in general. No wonder, then, that a very celebrated OT scholar once wrote that the Old Testament was a history into which other kinds of literature had been introduced (H.W. Robinson, 1946).

Today, though, I'm not so much interested in looking at the history itself, as in exploring with you in a rather rambling, perhaps inconclusive kind of way, *what* kind of history it is, and in seeing if that takes us anywhere. If it doesn't, there are at least points of interest along the way! Let me, though, at the outset, make it clear that quite a lot of the history we find in the OT is very recognizable to us as historical writing: a lot of it is fairly straightforward narrative of events, some of it, especially in the time of King David, giving a pretty intimate picture of politics and life at the royal court. And a lot of it is fun and a lot is tedious – just like history.

But at other levels it is a different kind of history. “History” is, in fact, a very slippery term and for all sorts of reasons. For example, I have just finished reading a book called *Neighbours* which, for the first time, discloses beyond any doubt whatsoever that the Polish inhabitants of the village of Jedwabne enthusiastically took part in the murder of their 1600 Jewish neighbours with whom they had lived for years, in 1941 – mainly by burning most of them alive in a local barn. And it shows that this was not an isolated instance. Yet, until recently all the history written about the Jews in wartime Poland ascribed their fate entirely to Nazi agency. So, a lot depends on *who* writes the history and on their agendas. Objectivity based solely on the facts is very difficult to achieve, even if it is thought desirable.

Because history is far more than the accumulation of “facts” about the past – it is about trying to tell a story, or to analyse a set of circumstances, or to describe how some institution developed and worked over time, or to evoke what life was like for certain people in certain times and places and although it must rest upon the careful reading and assessment of all sorts of available evidence and be demonstrated so to rest, there is always the matter of interpretation, of the stance of the student and writer and so on. That is why history is as much about debate as about anything. It is not necessarily something that is fixed and agreed. Far from it. And so it should be far from it. When it is fixed, especially officially fixed, there is great danger.

But this is to take a pretty academic approach. History, for many if not most people, is also about identity – the history of a people or of a religious tradition for example. People are said to be “proud of their history”, as families, or civic communities, or whole countries. And here history often veers off into what I might be tempted to call myth and legend, the powerful stories which constitute the awareness of a group or people, which in the cold light of historical study may or may not bear much relation to actual events. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century many histories were virtually “invented” to endorse nationalist aspirations for freedom from the dominance of powers like Austria-Hungary and Russia. And you need only think of Northern Ireland and the iconography of the Battle of the Boyne and William III to see what I’m getting at.

In particular, when you involve God in history, as the Old Testament does with much repetition but without any deviation or hesitation, you create something that we might want to call sacred or salvation history, not really a type of history open to the normal processes of academic historical research, yet utterly fundamental to believers, for the history is really the story of their encounters with God over a long period of time. This is reflected, for example, in certain texts in the OT which we think

might have been used in worship, a bit like creeds: *When your children ask you in time to come, "What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the LORD our God has commanded you?" then you shall say to your children, "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The LORD displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. Then the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case. If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right."* (Deut 26.5-10). You can see here, I hope, how worship and righteous living are grounded in response to God's action in history – in this case the foundational story of the Exodus and the entry into the promised land. So, in the Old Testament, while there is much material which can and must be used in writing the history of Israel, of its society and institutions and religion, sources in other words, there is underlying it all an approach to history which is about faith and belief and not about accurate scholarship, sifting of sources, balancing and debating the evidence. A perfect example of this is provided by the census King David ordered of which there are two accounts:

2 Samuel 24.1ff: *Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go, count the people of Israel and Judah." So the king said to Joab and the commanders of the army, who were with him, "Go through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beer-sheba, and take a census of the people, so that I may know how many there are. " .....But afterward, David was stricken to the heart because he had numbered the people. David said to the LORD, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O LORD, I pray you, take away the guilt of your servant; for I have done very foolishly."*

1 Chronicles 21.1ff: *Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to count the people of Israel. So David said to Joab and the commanders of the army, "Go, number Israel, from Beer-sheba to Dan, and bring me a report, so that I may know their number."... But God was displeased with this thing, and he struck Israel. David said to God, "I have sinned greatly in that I have done this thing. But now, I pray you, take away the guilt of your servant; for I have done very foolishly."*

Now, this doesn't sound like what a historian today would write at all which might go something like this: "King David, in the face of considerable opposition, now decided to hold a census", with a footnote to these texts and maybe other parallel material – there is for example a quite straightforward reference to another census done by Solomon. But what is really interesting here, on the level of salvation history, of Israel's encounters with God, is a development in understanding of God. In the first passage God is portrayed as inciting David to do something wrong for which he subsequently punishes him, whereas in the second Satan is made responsible- David is still punished. The author of Chronicles, writing later, couldn't believe that God would incite sin – so, another agent had to be offered. So, while God remains sovereign not everything that happens has to be directly ascribed to his will. And when you think that the OT does not in other places have much difficulty in ascribing massacres and genocide to God's direct will and purpose, you can see that this is an important insight. Salvation history is in part about the gradual grasping of the truth about God over a long period of encounter – it is, of course, our Christian belief that this took a great leap forward in the person of Jesus Christ. Similarly, you can see a development in the attitude to other nations. To begin with they are irrelevant – God is God of Israel's history and if the other nations are Israel's enemies, God destroys them; the prophets take them more seriously – they have a purpose for God, if only as weapons of judgment against Israel; but in the Exile and beyond the conviction became settled that if God is Universal

Lord of all human history and of all creation, then all peoples need to recognize this: *For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!): I am the LORD, and there is no other. I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, "Seek me in chaos." I the LORD speak the truth, I declare what is right. Assemble yourselves and come together, draw near, you survivors of the nations! They have no knowledge-- those who carry about their wooden idols, and keep on praying to a god that cannot save. Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together! Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the LORD? There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is no one besides me.*

*Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: "To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear." (Isaiah 45.18-24)* There is a trajectory here which is not unrelated, say, to the story of the coming of the wise men, the gentile world, to the infant Jesus.

I said earlier on that the OT “involves” God in history. But, from the perspective of the Old Testament that is nonsense. *We* don’t involve God in history; God involves himself by initiating the whole thing and then engaging with a particular people to disclose and commend his will and purpose. And this, it seems to me, remains a fundamental perspective we inherit from the Old Testament and still have to grapple with – human history is not a matter of indifference to God; rather it is willed by God, not an accident, and it is given a direction and purpose by God, which it is the purpose of the church, as much as it was of the OT community, to proclaim and disclose to all people. So, translated into our context, I suppose the claim would be that when all the careful academic work has quite necessarily and properly been done, there remain questions of meaning and purpose that lie beyond the study and writing of history. And, to

bring it into our immediate context as church people - you can study the church, its life and forms over the centuries by using the available sources and write “church history” in all sorts of ways and at all sorts of levels, but what about the realities of Word and Sacrament upon which it is based, realities in human history yet bearing the divine into history, into our lives now, from beyond all history? So, what the Old Testament simply assumes we still have to reckon with – human history is gritty and real and important – and there is a lot of it, pretty unvarnished in the OT - but God is always a major player and it all goes wrong if you exclude him from the game.