Following in the Footsteps of a Community:  
Biblical Stories and Life's Journey

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Summary: From the pages of the Old Testament unfolds a complicated story of a group of slaves who are liberated by a compassionate God and gradually form a community of Jews bound by a common history and scripture. This paper provides a broad outline of that community's story by dividing it into three major phases which I describe as journeys. Each journey reveals some of the strengths and weaknesses, successes and mistakes, memories and dreams of this imperfect but struggling community as it grows in relationship with itself and with its God. Though far from us in time and space, these Biblical journeys are not unlike our own as we ourselves grow up and grow old.

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**Introduction**

The books of the Bible, completed more than eighteen hundred years ago, were written over a period of one thousand-plus years, recounting a history and stories that are even older.1 While it is clearly unreasonable to approach the Bible as a book of answers to present-day questions (questions far removed from the context of the Bible), we rightly look to the Bible as a source of inspiration, a source of prayer, and indeed a source of instruction. It is a book of stories which teaches us as all good stories do – by making us think and reflect about our own lives. The Bible offers no easy
answers, yet these time-tested faith stories, written by people struggling to know themselves better so as to live authentically, do offer us new ways to think about our own lives as we enter the 21st century.

One serious question facing people living in industrialized settings today is "the graying of society." According to the Health and Welfare Ministry, 17.2% of the Japanese population was aged 65 or older in 2000. By the year 2015, it is projected that this age group will make up 25% of the population. Because people are living longer, new questions about the meaning of life are emerging. Many years may still stretch before us though our children (and even grandchildren) are grown, though our jobs have been filled with younger workers. How are we to fill this time? This question is further complicated by today's "throw-away," "death-denying" culture which values and craves all things new and modern. We are encouraged to discard old appliances and buy new ones rather than make even minor repairs. New improved cellular phones are constantly being marketed, leading many to add their "old" models to the growing garbage heaps of beeping handsets. Countless products promise "a younger-looking you." As we are called to investigate the meaningfulness of our later years, we must also look again at the earlier stages of life to see how we found or constructed meaning then. Unsurprisingly in this age of psychology, many theories have been developed which divide our lives into phases and characterize those phases. Can the Bible also offer us help in understanding the changes we experience as we grow up and grow older? I think it can.

Brazilian liberation theologian Carlos Mesters advises that we read the Bible with one eye on the text and one eye on our own lives and the lives of those around us, for only then will the Bible become truly relevant. In our reading, we should not try to fit ourselves into the Biblical story. Rather, we should see in what ways this story is already alive in us and in what ways it can be instructive. In this paper, I will investigate how a serious look at Biblical journeys may shed light on our life journeys. In the process, we will come to see how, in fact, reflecting upon our own journeys may also help us to understand Scripture, particularly the little read and often
misunderstood Old Testament. In many senses, we are walking in the ways of our ancestors.

1. Journeying as a Community: A Three-Fold Model

If we look to the Bible for instruction in the area of aging, our first discovery is that the actual lifespan of the people living during Biblical times was probably rarely more than about forty, despite the ages given for the ancestors! Jesus died in his thirties. Ordinary people worked hard physically and did not have proper or enough nutrition or health care, so their average lifespan was understandably shorter than that in the developed world today. Their youth also ended earlier than ours today. While they might have married just after puberty and immediately started families, today's young people are marrying later and maturing more slowly. Extended education and dependence on parents may prolong our youth into the twenties or even thirties. In so many ways, our lifespan today cannot be compared to anything we find between the covers of the Bible.

Nevertheless, I think that the Bible can offer some insight into the phases of our life. Once we step back and look at the Bible as a whole, as the story of the birth and growth of a small group of disciples of Jesus who would become "Church" or as a community of people who would become "Israel," we can begin to see growth phases which may provide some insight into our own lives. To emphasize that each phase is a part of an ongoing process, I will follow others in referring to each as a "journey." By "journey" I don't mean a day trip or a weekend away but rather a growth passage in life which includes pain as well as joy, travel as well as destination. In his book The Journey of Life, Thomas R. Cole emphasizes that each human experience is "potentially fresh." The growing up and old that results from our experiences "resembles a continuous journey down a river flowing inexorably toward the sea." Once we open the Bible and begin reading, we find ourselves on such a journey.
A. Fellowship, Fear, and Freedom in the New Testament

Though our lives are all different and often rather complicated, a simple three-fold division of our lifespan will help us begin to see patterns in our lives. In order to explain these three journeys briefly at the outset, I will use the New Testament story of Jesus and his followers. The general outline of this story is probably more familiar and may help guide us as we enter into the longer and less well-known story of Israel in the Old Testament. Although each journey carries with it ups and downs, strong points and weaknesses, and although these journeys are not always clearly separated from each other and may overlap in our lives, we can see the main characteristics of these journeys by looking at the three growth phases of Jesus' disciples: growth from (1) their meeting and following and imitating and rebelling against Jesus to (2) their confusion and fear at the arrest, crucifixion and death of Jesus to (3) their experience of the risen Christ and their work to spread the good news.\(^\text{10}\)

When we first meet the disciples in the Gospels, we meet people who follow Jesus eagerly when called. In this first journey, Simon and Andrew immediately drop their nets and accept Jesus' invitation. James and John leave their father in his boat and join the group; Levi quickly quits his post at the tax collection booth. They are hopeful and energetic. They are filled with ideas and dreams. These followers recognize a great leader and come to find their own identity in this Jesus. At times, though, they miss the point of Jesus' teaching and seek instead to further their own position, attempting to lead before they are ready. For example, James and John approach Jesus and say, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." ... 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' In reply, Jesus recognizes their overeagerness and asks them a question: "'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?'" (Mark 10:35-37).\(^\text{11}\) Without understanding Jesus' meaning, yet eager to share in the glory of their teacher, they naively respond that they can indeed drink from the cup of suffering. They have a lot of growing up to do, and their understanding of Jesus' message is often shallow or mistaken, yet they are enthusiastic and willing to
leave much behind in order to follow Jesus to his victory, as they perceive it.

In fact, though, the disciples cannot yet follow Jesus through his suffering. In their second journey, with the arrest, beating, humiliation, and crucifixion of Jesus, their grand dreams fall apart. They flee from Gethsemane, leaving Jesus alone in his suffering and death on the cross. Surely they begin to wonder why they gave up everything to follow a man who is a failure. Should they return to their fishing? They can no longer be followers of Jesus, for he is not with them anymore. In the darkness cast by the cross, they struggle to rediscover who they are. Even on the morning of what came to be Easter Sunday, they still feel uncertain and afraid. Mark tells us that only a few women go to Jesus' tomb. Though they receive a message that Jesus is alive, they flee from the tomb, "for terror and amazement [have] seized them; and they [say] nothing to anyone, for they [are] afraid" (Mark 16:8). In addition, when Jesus appears to the disciples, they usually do not immediately recognize him. They must be constantly reassured, "Do not be afraid" (Mark 16:6; Matthew 28:5, 10; Luke 24:5, 37). They do not know what to do; they are immobilized by fear. Their whole world seems to have fallen apart, and they cannot begin to imagine how to put the pieces back together again.

At the beginning of their third journey as a community, the disciples slowly begin to understand that what they had perceived as a failure was not a failure at all. When Jesus appears to them, he repeatedly tells them not to be afraid, and gradually they are overcome with joy. Although Jesus says he must leave them, he promises nevertheless to "be with [them] always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Finally, fifty days later, these disciples receive the new energy they need to proclaim the gospel and carry on the work of Jesus. The followers of Jesus are all gathered together on the day of Pentecost, and

... suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ... All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2:1-2, 4)
They again ask the question, "Brothers, what should we do?" (Ibid. 37), but this time they do not ask in dismay and fear but with a renewed desire to follow Jesus actively. Gradually they learn to find themselves not in the physical Jesus who died but in the risen Christ whom they always have with them. With a deepened understanding of Jesus and of themselves, they enter fully into the ministries of preaching, healing, and breaking bread together as a community. Many are persecuted or even martyred, yet they now understand what they could not in their first journey -- suffering does not always mean failure.

Looking at this familiar story, we can see clear growth in the community of Jesus’ followers, growth which perhaps mirrors our own development from childhood to middle age to old age. First, young, enthusiastic disciples find their identity in the concrete Jesus, and, though often overzealous and filled with misunderstanding, they establish a temporary identity for themselves. Second, these followers enter into a profound crisis once their identity is called into question with the scandalous death of Jesus, the very one who gave them their identity. Third, with the gift of the Spirit, these fearful followers are transformed, freed from their often rather narrow and selfish understanding of the Gospel and freed for authentic life with God. With new understanding of themselves and of their relationships, they set out to proclaim, however imperfectly, what they have learned to all the world.

Keeping this three-fold pattern in mind, let us now look more closely at the growth of the community of people who were to become Israel. In so doing, we may also come to understand better ourselves, our parents, our children, our grandchildren.

2. First Journey: Learning to Walk, Standing Tall (c. 1300 - 722 B.C.E.)

This first journey begins with the birth of Israel as a community at the time of the Exodus and travels the long road of its childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. In general, it is a time of discovery and extroversion, a time of growth for Israel as people
of God. It is a period of finding meaning in order and strength, a period of figuring out how to succeed in the world. Israel is much like Jesus' followers during this period: at times insecure and at times overconfident. By the end of this approximately 600-year journey, Israel forms a temporary, fragile identity that is largely based on its achievements. In our lives, too, we grow up and try to stand tall, often forming an equally unstable self-understanding centered on our accomplishments, relationships and jobs.

A. Passing through the Waters

When asked about the beginning of Israel, many people might be tempted to turn to Genesis, the book of beginnings, for the answer. Though these stories of creation and of the "Fathers and Mothers" of Israel lay an important foundation for the Biblical narrative, baby Israel really is born from the waters of the Red Sea. The book of Exodus recounts the story of how Israel's ancestors, known as "Hebrews," escape oppression in Egypt around 1300 B.C.E. Guided by God and led by Moses, Miriam, and Aaron, a group of slaves (and sympathizers they meet along the way) bonds together to form a new community. It is through this experience of liberation that Israel is born. In much the same way as many Americans hold the Declaration of Independence as a common history regardless of when their families immigrated to the United States, so too the people of Israel come to share in this story of God's saving power.

The Exodus is a remarkable event, an unmerited grace from God who hears the groaning of the people and responds (Exodus2:23-25). However, lest the people become arrogant because they have been chosen by this God Yahweh (LORD), God reminds them that their relationship reflects God's great love not Israel's great merit:

It was not because you were more numerous that any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you -- for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the LORD brought you out from the house of slavery, from the hand of
Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 7:7-8)

According to this passage, God’s choosing of Israel originates from love. Israel is not perfect, sometimes far from it, but God loves the community no less because of its failings.

As human beings, our personhood arises from love, from our own experiences of embracing and being embraced. The love of parents for their children, the love between spouses, and the love among friends that is genuine and deep is love that has no reward beyond itself. Although such love does desire love in return, it neither demands nor depends on it. The presence of such love allows us to grow. Mysteriously we are capable of loving and of being loved though we are small and, at times, not so great.

B. Like Parent, Like Child

After this group of Hebrew slaves passes through the Red Sea, they wander in the wilderness for forty years under the leadership of Moses. During this time they receive another great gift from the LORD, the Law. Although at first glance it may be disappointing that slaves, just released from bondage, should find themselves seemingly bound by new rules, the Law is necessary to secure the future of Israel. It is a furthering of the promises of birth. While the Exodus frees the people from oppression and slavery, the Law is intended to free them for a full life with each other and with God. Reading the laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy might be tiresome. We might even feel that the rules are excessive. Yet, the purpose is to raise Israel so that its members might grow "in the image of God" (Genesis 1:27), holy as they were created. The LORD explains to Moses: "Speak to all the congregation of this people Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:1-2). Young Israel needs guidance, and God gives it in the form of the Law which develops over time and in response to the needs of the community. In the early years, Israel truly desires to become like the parent who gave birth to it through the parting of the waters. Israel knows almost innately that God is the one who feeds and cares for it, as yet a dependent
However the Law, itself an expression of love, is never meant to take the place of love. The Law serves an important purpose, but it has its limits. In Deuteronomy we find the great words of the Shema:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away . . . . 
(Deuteronomy 6:4-7)

In addition to this emphasis on loving God, we also find in the Bible concrete laws designed to support, indeed love, the vulnerable in society -- widows, children, the poor, foreigners -- summed up in Leviticus: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:18). This Golden Rule so often quoted from the New Testament is also valued by the people Israel. The Law guides us, but the absolute Law is Love.

Every parent teaches, at least at first, by setting some rules, and children learn appropriate manners and hygiene through the words and actions of those they depend on. When all goes well, they learn how to foster healthy relationships with other people and with the world around them. Little by little, they come to understand both the wisdom of the rules and their limits. While we often teach by saying either, "Never, never," or "Always, always," most rules really do have exceptions. Once we have a mature understanding of the spirit of the rules we can discern these exceptions. It is, however, a long process. As children grow and become more independent, they often rather prematurely and irresponsibly challenge and defy both the laws and the lawmakers.
C. Peer Pressure

Under the leadership of Moses, Joshua, and the charismatic military leaders called judges, Israel finds its way out of the wilderness and into the promised land of Canaan, and, after years as a wandering people, begins to settle down. The simple desires of community members to follow the holy way of God turn complicated as they become involved in the world. They see not only the face of God but also the interesting faces of so many others. Some of these new faces confirm how they have been raised; others question it and offer tempting alternatives. As a new generation grows up after the death of Joshua, the book of Judges tells us that:

Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and worshiped the Baals: and they abandoned the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt: they followed other gods, from among the gods of the people who were all around them, and bowed down to them; and they provoked the LORD to anger. They abandoned the LORD, and worshiped Baal and Astartes. (Judges 2:11-13)

Here it is not a question of following gods merely with different names. It is about following gods with different values. While Yahweh is a faithful God who hears the cries of suffering people and leads them to freedom, these new gods are erotic, exciting gods of rain and thunder and fertility. They seem more powerful and therefore are more attractive than Yahweh. As an agricultural people, Israel wants to be sure it can benefit from the gods in control of its livelihood. Besides, youthful eyes are perhaps naturally drawn to the new, colorful characters around them.

After some years living under the sporadic leadership of judges, Israel starts to feel the need for more permanent leadership in the form of a king. This desire is perhaps partly a need for strength and stability as a people and partly an inclination to imitate the surrounding nations. While strength and stability are not inherently negative, pursuing them can indeed lead to a form of idolatry, "the profoundly serious business of
committing oneself or betting one's life on finite centers of value and power as the
source of one's (or one's group's) confirmation of worth and meaning." Imitation, too,
can be a dangerous road to follow. In the case of Israel, the elders approach Samuel, a
seer, prophet and judge, and ask for "a king to govern[them], like the other nations." Wise Samuel is upset by their request and prays to God. God responds with these words:

"Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not
rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. . . . Now then,
listen to their voice; only -- you shall solemnly warn them, and show them all the
ways of the king who shall reign over them." (1 Samuel 8:4-9)

Samuel does as God asks, explaining to the people the corruption that will reign over
them in the form of a king. The people, however, are not dissuaded from their desires.
The warning goes unheeded. Israel makes for itself a king.

Like Israel, we also grow up by learning from our own mistakes, rather than from
the well-intentioned warnings issued by experienced adults. Especially though not
exclusively during our adolescent years, we are vulnerable to peer pressure. We want to
fit in with those around us, with what we watch on television or see in the movies, and
may often deny or hide our real selves. We want to be in fashion and are willing to pay
the price for the proper clothes and accessories. Movies stars and singers and brand
names become our gods; the advice of our parents seems outdated. Somehow the wise
parents of our childhood have mysteriously been replaced with people who don't seem
to understand anything. We are determined to travel our own road, to create for
ourselves a king.

D. A Fragile Identity

Around 1020 B.C.E. Saul, "a handsome young man" (1 Samuel 9:2) with military
prowess, is anointed Israel's first king.17 After demonstrating that success on the
battlefield does not mean success in the world of politics, Saul is rejected18 and replaced
by another handsome young man, David,19 the youngest son of Jesse. In contrast to Saul, David proves himself an astute politician. Winning the support of the Twelve Tribes, David establishes a strong United Kingdom with its capital in the ancient city of Jerusalem. Later, from amid the struggles following David's death, his son Solomon20 emerges as successor.

While David was a shepherd from the small town of Bethlehem, Solomon is the son of a king living in the capital city of Jerusalem. Solomon is educated, wise in the ways of the world, and has great ambitions and expensive tastes. He expands and strengthens the kingdom of his father, centralizing power around himself and establishing important diplomatic ties with other peoples. He completes building projects which make Jerusalem shine. With forced labor and heavy taxes, Solomon oversees the construction of the great Temple in seven years and his own palace and administrative buildings in thirteen years. Israel has reached the height of its worldly success.

While Yahweh is not forgotten completely during this time, God is perhaps remembered more often for giving Israel the land, the Temple, and the king than for giving birth to a community by loving and liberating poor slaves. In this passage from the Psalms, we witness a people that understands its success at least partially in terms of the glittering wealth with which it is surrounded:

Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God.  
His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of the earth,  
Mount Zion in the far north, the city of the great King.  
Within its citadels God has shown himself a sure defense.  

...  
Walk about Zion, go all around it, count its towers  
consider well its ramparts; go through its citadels,  
that you may tell the next generation that this is God,  
our God forever and ever. He will be our guide forever. (Psalm 48:1-3, 12-14)
Israel has confidence in the walls of the city, in the position of power it has created for itself. Israel does not expect the changes that are on the way.

Like Israel, we may sometimes equate our worth with our concrete possessions and accomplishments. As we enter into early adulthood, we may list up what we have and confuse it with who we are. We may have achieved some of our childhood goals: received certain degrees, travelled, attained stable or even powerful positions in companies or in society, reached a certain figure in our bank accounts, found a partner, and had children. We may feel secure, settled. However, if we hold onto these successes too tightly, we are setting ourselves up for future confusion and distress, for we may well outlive our wealth, power, recognition. When we lose our grip, we risk losing ourselves.

E. Journey's End

During David and Solomon's reigns, baby Israel, weak and dependent in every way, grows into a powerful kingdom and seemingly forgets its infancy. Israel reaches the height of independence, experiencing something of a "Golden Age." Yet, all is not well. After Solomon's death, the United Kingdom splits into two, with "Israel" in the north and Judah in the south. The people, already burdened with taxation and forced labor, are now divided from each other, ruled by separate kings. Most of the kings follow ways of corruption, bringing instability and confusion into their kingdoms. It is during this time that prophets emerge in larger numbers, pointing out the injustice in the land and calling for a return to the values of Yahweh that constitute the foundation of the community called Israel. Few of the powerful pay much attention to them, though, since comfortable, busy lives are not often eager to hear words of criticism or warning.

Hosea is a prophet who speaks to his people in the north when they already have clear evidence that their kingdom is falling apart. They are at war with the great Assyrians, and they are losing. The people are suffering. Through the prophet Hosea, God summarizes the growth of the community Israel:
When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.
The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the 
Baals, and offering incense to idols.
Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did 
not know that I healed them.
I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like 
those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.
...
My people are bent on turning away from me. (Hosea 11:1-4, 7a)

According to the prophecy of Hosea, the kingdom of "Israel" cannot escape destruction, and, in fact, it does not. In c. 722 B.C.E., the Assyrians conquer the northern capital of Samaria and absorb "Israel" into its empire. Along with his words of unavoidable destruction, however, Hosea includes in his prophecy a message of hope for the future from a compassionate and faithful God. Through Hosea the LORD says, "I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. . . . They shall again live beneath my shadow, they shall flourish as a garden; they shall blossom like the vine, their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon" (Hosea 14:4,7). This restoration, however, will not come too quickly. It will not come without pain.

The transition from our "Golden Age," from our height of power and influence in our families and society, to our second flourishing is also a journey of loss and pain. There may be some warnings, some signs that our lives are about to change. Some of our important relationships may be strained. Restructuring may be happening at our offices. We may feel uncharacteristically depressed or unsatisfied with lives which once seemed secure and fulfilling. But in the busyness of our lives, we may fail to see these warnings, or we may unconsciously choose not to see them, hoping that they will fade away. Rather than disappearing, however, they will most probably develop into serious challenges in our lives and disrupt our seemingly secure lives to an extent we cannot ignore.
3. Second Journey: Falling Hard, Trying to Stand Again (c. 722 - 539 B.C.E.)

The second journey is an unexpected one for Israel, despite the warnings issued by the prophets. Like the followers of Jesus, this community neither perceives that hard times are approaching nor understands that suffering can be a moment of opportunity in addition to a moment of pain. This journey is that of a middle-aged, well-established Israel that questions itself as its world seems to crumble around it. Israel falls hard, losing those things -- the land, the Temple, and the king -- that once served as its source of identity. Temporarily replacing those things are feelings of chaos, disorientation, isolation. By the end of this thankfully shorter second journey, Israel is on its way to regaining its balance by forming a more lasting identity for itself. Israel perhaps mirrors us as we suddenly find ourselves painfully re-evaluating our list of achievements and seeking a more stable sense of self.

A. Tears of Anxiety

As we saw above, by c. 922 B.C.E. Israel had already split into two kingdoms, "Israel" in the north and Judah in the south. That was a cause for grief already. Then in c. 722 B.C.E., "Israel" fell to the Assyrians. Although Judah remains semi-independent by paying huge tribute to the Assyrians, corruption reigns in the palace, and prophets can see clearly that the future is bleak.

Among the prophets in Judah during this time of semi-independence is Jeremiah. Like other prophets, Jeremiah speaks of the terrible judgment which is to come as well as the eventual renewal of the community's relationship with God. Unique to Jeremiah, however, are his powerful personal laments in which he speaks of the trials he has endured. As "the weeping prophet," Jeremiah highlights the importance of tears as a first step in the admission that something is wrong. Jeremiah speaks these words from God:

Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider and call for the mourning women to come;
send for the skilled women to come;
Let them quickly raise a dirge over us, so that our eyes may run down with tears,
and our eyelids flow with water.
For a sound of wailing is heard from Zion: "How we are ruined! We are utterly
shamed, because we have left the land, because they have cast down our
 dwellings." (Jeremiah 9:17-19)

Professional women are called to lead the community in mourning. Before anything can
be done to solve problems or ease pain, Israel must admit that there is reason to grieve.
Tears start the process of healing.

Like Israel, we sometimes need "mourning women" in the form of a good movie or
a sad song to be able to let down our strong facades and allow the tears flow. Some of
us, perhaps, have been taught that crying is a sign of weakness. In fact, however, it is
unashamed honest emotion which is a first step in healing. Holding back the tears, we
increase the risk of drowning.

B. A Crumbling Identity

The crisis reaches a climax in c. 586 B.C.E. when Jerusalem, the capital of Judah,
falls to the Babylonians, the new superpower in the area, under the leadership of King
Nebuchadnezzar. All but the poorest people are deported to Babylon where they live in
exile, the Temple is destroyed, and King Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, is tortured
and dies in a foreign land. As the walls of the Temple crumble so does the identity of
the community of Israel. Suddenly, Israel doesn't know who it is anymore. By the Tigris
and Euphrates Rivers, far from their homeland, the Israelites lament:

By the rivers of Babylon -- there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there we hung up our harps.
For there our captors asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! (Psalm 137:1-5)

The Babylonians seem to recognize the distress of the exiles and taunt them by requesting joyful songs that remind them of all they have lost. Having nothing to replace their stolen identity, the Israelites try to hold fast to Jerusalem and the Temple. Their tears turn into an expression of the true anger that they feel:

O daughter Babylon, you devastator!

Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!
Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rocks!
(Ibid., 8-9)

Although this is a particularly severe passage, revealing both what Israel actually experienced from its Babylonian conquerors and also the depth of its pain, cries for vengeance are not uncommon in the Psalms. These cries are not about action, however, as they are situated within prayers directed to God. These cries are about honest expression before God, but admitting a desire for violent retaliation is not the same as carrying out the deed. In fact, by voicing true feelings before God, no matter how ugly they may be, Israel might be releasing the anger that dwells within the community, thereby preventing violent action.

Cries for vengeance are not uncommon in our own lives either, though we might silence them. When we feel angry, we sometimes believe that we will find relief from our pain by hurting those who have hurt us. We have rightly been taught to refrain from violent behavior, but if we don't have a way to release our anger productively and peacefully, as Israel does in its prayer, hatred simply builds up inside of us until it reaches a breaking point. We either destroy ourselves or act out our anger against others, whether they be the ones responsible for our suffering or not. Newspapers regularly report both suicides and cases in which children and adults explode and
commit acts of violence. Simply ignoring real feelings of anger cannot diffuse the power of rage. We must find an outlet for these feelings, transforming them into positive energy that will help lift us up from where we have fallen.

C. An Inward Journey

In exile the Israelites embark on a different kind of journey.\textsuperscript{27} During Israel's youth, forward motion seemed almost effortless. The road from the waters of the Red Sea to the door of Solomon's Temple seemed natural. Though there were, of course, many challenges and disappointments, the people had enough energy and enthusiasm to carry them through. An older, exiled Israel now finds that forward motion is impossible. There is nowhere to go, or so it seems. Lost in the midst of a profound crisis, the community begins to understand that the journey it must make if it is to survive is an inward one. Since their identity has been stolen from them, the people must turn inside themselves. They must reflect on the past in order to understand the present and make possible a future. It is perhaps the most difficult journey Israel has had to make, and the temptation is surely to avoid it. Unlike its earlier journeys, this journey is a choice. While they have to be involved with the outside world in order to attain short-term survival in a foreign land, they must choose to make time for reflection in order to secure the long-term survival of the community.

During the period of the exile, the people tell the stories they heard from their childhood. They gather together all their memories as a community, from the time of the Exodus through the collapse of the monarchy. They recount narratives of even older times, stories about Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekkah, Jacob and Rachel and Leah. They share the mythic tales of creation. In all these stories they begin to see God's presence and action in history in new ways. They also start to understand more clearly how their lives have shaped and have been shaped by their relationship with God. Over time they piece together old wisdom and add some new insights, and, in the telling of the story, they are on their way to re-understanding who they are as a people of God.
We also often encounter a major crisis in the middle of our established, active years when we are the workers and responsibility-holders in our families and communities. Often it is caused by a change in what has given us identity, such as the relationship with our parents or spouse or children or job. Parents who have devoted themselves to their children may find themselves in an empty nest, unsure of what to do. Workers who have devoted themselves to their companies may feel threatened by younger colleagues and also may suddenly feel like visitors in their own homes. In addition, the death of parents or peers may lead us to begin wondering about our own death. This journey of self-discovery requires time for introspection, for investigating who we are instead of what we have, for discovering the core of our identity. Since it is a time when many of us are extremely busy and are burdened by many demands inside and outside the home, it is often difficult to find the time we need for reflection, an activity that doesn't help pay the bills. This lonely inward journey, however, is what will enable us to set out on our third journey.28

D. Journey's End

Israel lives in exile for more than forty years. Shortly before 539 B.C.E., a prophet known as Second Isaiah begins to speak about the hope of restoration, the hope that Hosea and Jeremiah and the other earlier prophets promised would come one day. God speaks to the people, reminding them of the covenant of old, saying, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine" (Isaiah 43:1). A lot has changed for Israel since Yahweh first lovingly called the people, but God's love has not changed. Through Second Isaiah, God encourages Israel to move forward again after years of reflecting in exile. He tells them to leave behind the old mistakes that caused them to fall so hard, and he provides the needed hand to help Israel stand again. He says to them:

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.
The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise. (Isaiah 43:18-21)

In this passage, God speaks of a new Exodus, a second birth for Israel. What God did before by the waters of the Red Sea, God will do again. God promises to guide and feed Israel as it journeys to a new promised land.

The people of Israel have grown while in exile. While they are ready to move on to something new, however, they can scarcely believe that the time has finally come. They respond, saying, "The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me" (Isaiah 49:14). It is difficult to trust in joy after suffering for so long, but Yahweh persuades them to believe by repeating his promise:

Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.
See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me. (Ibid. 15-16)

If God first chose Israel because of its greatness or power, perhaps God could abandon this sometimes unfaithful community, but God has embraced Israel out of love. Even during the exile when God seems silent, this faithful parent is listening to the cries of the people, waiting for the proper time to extend a hand once again. The time has arrived. We can hear hope in the words Second Isaiah speaks about the righteous sufferer, "Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge" (Isaiah 53:11).

Though at first it might be difficult to believe in joy again, we must open ourselves
to that something new when it perhaps surprisingly appears. Some time in middle age, perhaps after tears, anger, and lonely reflection, we also come to know ourselves better. We come to understand our relationships better as well. Which relationships are truly based on love, which on greatness or power or beauty? These are questions we must ask ourselves as well as those with whom we are in relationship. Some relationships last, endure the crisis of exile. Others might not, but we emerge from this difficult second journey knowing ourselves better, placing our identity not in what we have but in something deeper.

4. Third Journey: Sitting Down, Seeing Something New (c. 539 - )

The third journey is a long, open-ended journey guided by the wisdom which grows out of the depths of Israel's experience of exile. The provisional identity of Israel's youth, an identity grounded in the land, Temple, and king, has been questioned, leading Israel to make a recommitment to its covenantal relationship with Yahweh, as Jesus' followers recommitted themselves to Christ. While Israel was forced into exile as Israelites, it emerges as a new community of people called Jews, "a people of the Book." Although this journey, like our own journeys into old age, is accompanied by real loss (Israel does not possess as much worldly power or strength as it did during its youth or "Golden Age"), it is nevertheless a period of creativity and growth. Having reflected on its history of ups and downs, Israel is ready to make informed decisions about its future as a community. Internal disagreements are often intense, but Israel is now fit for wise leadership and prophetic witness. As older people with new perspectives, we share this potential for creative action.

A. Tears of Joy

In c. 539 B.C.E., not so long after the preaching of Jeremiah and Second Isaiah, the people in exile receive good news. Yahweh is a faithful God! The Babylonians are finally
defeated by the Persians under the leadership of King Cyrus (539-530 B.C.E.). Although Israel remains under the domination of a foreign nation, the Persians have a different philosophy in ruling their kingdom. They believe that their kingdom will be strong if they allow local communities some freedom of self-rule. King Cyrus makes the following, welcomed proclamation:

The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of those among you who are of his people -- may God be with them! -- are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel -- he is the God who is in Jerusalem .... (Ezra 1:2-3)

The exiles' dreams of returning to their beloved Jerusalem are realized. Their longing to stand again inside the Temple becomes a possibility as King Cyrus approves the rebuilding of God's house. The people return home in stages from the time of King Cyrus until the time of King Artaxerxes II (404-358 B.C.E.). It is a long and sometimes difficult process, but in the end, they are not exiles anymore.

As the people gradually overcome their fears and return little by little to the land, the third prophet in the tradition of Isaiah emerges, saying that the "spirit of the Lord GOD" is upon him. Although we cannot equate this "spirit" with the Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit and the Trinity, this spirit is indeed associated with the new energy in the community as the Holy Spirit is for Jesus' followers at the time of Pentecost. This anointed prophet, speaking through the power of God's spirit, says,

[the LORD] has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;
They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

(Isaiah 61:1-2,4)

This good news is deeper than that of Cyrus’ permission to return to the land and rebuild. It is one thing to return to the land with permission to restore the community; it is quite another to have the energy to do it. While King Cyrus provides the people with the concrete opportunity to rebuild their lives, it is the power of God’s spirit which comforts and liberates, enabling them to take hold of that opportunity.

The change in our situation of exile probably does not happen with the fanfare of King Cyrus’ proclamation. While it may come suddenly, more likely it will develop gradually over time. Something new – a new relationship, job, hobby, or simply a new perspective – might pull us out of ourselves and push us into the world on a new journey. A deeper, more mature recommitment to something old may have the same effect. As we enter into our third journey, we, too, need concrete opportunities to participate in our families and in our society, sometimes in new and unexpected ways. Because of today’s values, these opportunities are not always easy to find. We often hear or read reports focusing on the elderly as an increased burden on the young in terms of health care and pensions. Society must work harder to recognize older citizens as the human assets they truly are rather than as burdens to our material resources. Beyond that, however, it is we ourselves who must allow the spirit of encouragement to enter into us and enable us to embrace new challenges. Without this energy, we have only missed opportunities. With it we have a chance to move beyond our solitary journeys and walk a new road together with others.

B. A Lasting Identity

While in exile, the people took time to remember and to think. They brought together the pieces of their story as a community, and wrote them down as a single
narrative extending from the creation of the world to at least the death of Moses. Though perhaps not yet included in their Book, they also knew the stories of their kings and the words of their prophets. The painful memories of the destruction of Jerusalem were not far from them. Within all of this, they find new meaning.

In the mid-5th century B.C.E., when the people of Israel are settled in their towns, the people gather together in a public square. Assembled there,

They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. . . . He read from it . . . from early morning until midday, . . . and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. (Nehemiah 8:1-3)

What Ezra reads is the product of years of reflection in exile. It is the Torah ("Law"), the first five books of the Old Testament. This Book becomes central to the identity of the Jewish community. While the land, the Temple, and the king are concrete and can be stolen or destroyed, a living story written in the hearts of people is difficult to erase. When identity is internalized, it becomes more durable.

Surviving our own period of isolation, we also emerge with a sense of self that is much stronger than any we may have had in our youth. Since our physical strength and earning power may be decreasing, a healthy sense of self must be rooted more deeply in who we are as human beings, creatures of God. Such rootedness should enable us to turn outward. In her classic work on aging, Simone de Beauvoir notes that "in old age we should wish still to have passions strong enough to prevent us turning in upon ourselves." Rather than standing tall, we are more comfortably and stably seated, but we should be looking up and forward. Though there is no guarantee that the road ahead will be smooth, we are surely better prepared for the unexpected bumps.
C. Gift of Diversity

For Israel, there are, in fact, many bumps in the road. Returning home energized by the spirit of the LORD is the beginning of a long and sometimes difficult journey. There is much work to be done and, as is easy to imagine, not all the returning exiles agree about what should be done or how it should be done. Although the returnees may be wiser for the experience of the exile and although they may be inspired by the spirit, they nevertheless have different opinions. A less concrete identity opens the way to many more interpretations of who they are and should be as a community. Such diversity brings both life and conflict.

One major disagreement concerns the rebuilding of the Temple. Although they begin rebuilding upon their return, the progress is often delayed and the Temple is not completed until 515 B.C.E. On the one hand, some returnees recognize that the Temple became a false source of security during the time before the exile. They want to avoid repeating the same mistake. Arguing against the Temple, Third Isaiah recognizes the suffering of the community and suggests that God is displeased because of injustice in the land. The people should, he argues, focus on restoring justice rather than on restoring the Temple. Third Isaiah speaks God's message:

Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting place? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things are mine, says the LORD.

But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word. Whoever slaughters an ox is like one who kills a human being; ... whoever makes a memorial offering of frankincense, like one who blesses an idol. (Isaiah 66:1-3)

With all of creation belonging to God, what need is there to build a house? What can
human beings hope to make that can compare with God's creation? God does not want gifts or sacrifices; rather, the people can prepare themselves to receive God's favor by listening to God's word. In the humble of heart God delights.

On the other hand, however, some returnees argue that it was not the Temple but the attitude of the people that was the problem. They believe that the Temple actually can serve to unify the people in a positive way. Representing this opposing position, two other prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, are most influential. Like Third Isaiah, they also recognize the suffering of the people and suggest that it has something to do with God's displeasure. However, they argue that God is unhappy about the delay in the rebuilding of the Temple and urge the officials and priests to push through with the construction. When some argue that the time has not yet come to rebuild the temple, Haggai responds by saying, "Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?" (Haggai 1:4). Eventually the people are persuaded and the Temple is completed. Over the next 550 years, this unifying Temple, known as the Second Temple, will endure periods of desecration by Israel's foes as well as periods of renovation. In 70 C.E. the Romans will destroy it.

In addition to rebuilding the Temple, the city walls, and other buildings, the Jews have much work to do in restoring their community. Although the people gathering share a common story, a common Book, they are just returning from more than forty years of living in foreign lands. Their recent histories are different. They struggle with the question of insiders and outsiders. Who belongs in their community? On the one hand, there is a group that understands that they do not merit God's love through their greatness. God is compassionate and loving, and that love extends to all, not just to the insiders. Again we see the vision of Third Isaiah who challenges the people to create a new kind of community.33

And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, ... these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.
Thus says the Lord GOD who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them besides those already gathered. (Isaiah 56:6-8)

Third Isaiah envisions an inclusive community, one which brings together various people with a common goal of serving God. The origin of the people does not matter, as it did not matter in the early history of Israel. The Hebrew slaves freed from Egypt did not all share a common origin, though they did share a common experience. They were oppressed and they were liberated.

On the other hand, however, there is a group that sees how Israel was led astray in the past by people who did not share the same values. Throughout the adolescence and young adulthood of Israel, competing values lured many of the people away from the teachings of God. Now, after the exile, though the returnees are in their own land, many of the them have with them foreign wives and children. When Ezra becomes aware of this reality, he gathers the people in the square on a rainy day and makes the following announcement:

"You have trespassed and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now make confession to the LORD the God of your ancestors, and do his will; separate yourself from the people of the land and from the foreign wives." (Ezra 10:10-11)

This more conservative group does not want to repeat the mistakes of the past, so it advocates for a more closed understanding of the community. Those present agree to the proclamation. The book of Ezra ends with a long list of the names of those who had married foreign women followed by the simple statement: "All these had married foreign women, and they sent them away with their children" (Ezra 10:44).

As older people, we may have very strong opinions that have grown and developed
over years of experience. We may hold tightly to our positions, be they liberal or conservative, precisely because they have proved themselves true over time. It is not at all surprising that disagreements remain since "what you see depends upon where you sit." How should we spend our resources? What is of value? Should we focus on short-term basic needs or long-term agendas? While some argue that we should jump onto the internationalization bandwagon, others demand that we preserve our own cultures by separating ourselves. The Bible was not edited to produce a single, clear voice; part of its wisdom lies in its internal dialogue. As much as we might hold onto our own positions in our communities today, hopefully we are able to see that there are no easy answers. A variety of views is what will enable us to remain connected to our past and to become open to the possibilities of a new future.

D. Journey's End?

The Biblical record of Israel's story and people extends through the book of Daniel, completed perhaps in the mid-second century B.C.E. Although the story of Daniel is set around the time when the Persian King Cyrus conquered the Babylonians, the book was actually written during the period of persecution under the Seleucid ruler Antiochus Epiphanes. In Daniel we find the first mention of immortality. Most of the books of the Old Testament emphasize life before death. All people, righteous or not, are thought to die and descend into the shadowy pit called Sheol. Death means separation from God for all people, so any distinction between the lives of the righteous and unrighteous is to be found among the living. However, in the face of the intense persecution and Jewish martyrdom of this period, ideas about immortality begin to take shape. Interpreting his own vision about the end time, Daniel writes,

"At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people... And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to
It is the wise and the righteous not the strong and successful who will overcome death. It is wisdom and righteousness that have eternal value. While an early or a violent death was at one time considered a sign of God's disfavor, this time of persecution leads the Jews to articulate a new understanding. Although physical old age remains a blessing, the book of Wisdom shifts the emphasis and tells us that "old age is not honored for length of time, or measured by number of years; but understanding is gray hair for anyone, and a blameless life is ripe old age" (Wisdom 4:8-9).

One great figure or "shining star" in the Apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees is ninety-year-old Eleazar who is being encouraged by Seleucid oppressors to betray his faith in order to save himself from a gruesome death. Considering the impact of his actions on those around him, especially the young, he says,

"Even if for the present I would avoid the punishment of mortals, yet whether I live or die I shall not escape the hands of the Almighty. Therefore, by bravely giving up my life now, I will show myself worthy of my old age and leave to the young a noble example of how to die a good death willingly and nobly for the revered and holy laws." (2 Maccabees 6:26-28)

In dying he leaves a model of courage and faithfulness to his suffering nation. Because of his righteousness and wisdom, he will never really die but will live in the memory of all who hear his story.

During our lives we might try to hold onto our power — our physical power and our mental power. Power often earns us respect from the world and in turn gives us confidence in ourselves. However such strength cannot last, and vainly trying to hold onto it can obstruct our view of what is truly lasting. Though our bodies and minds may fail, part of our power lies in what we can give back to our community. In our way of living, we can pass on our wisdom to another generation, one which will surely have to...
make its own mistakes, yet one which can keep our model before its eyes. Through our model, others may surely come to see that "the souls of the righteous are in the hands of God, and no torment will ever touch them . . . For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality" (Wisdom 3:1,4).

Conclusion

The Old Testament does not provide us with easy answers to any of today's complex questions, but it can help us reflect on the ups and downs in our own lives. Moreover, it is an example of and a witness to the power of storytelling. Storytelling helped Israel to discover and create for itself a strong identity. Storytelling enabled Jesus to communicate his message of the Reign of God to his followers. Storytelling has played an important role in keeping the communities of Israel and of the Church alive for centuries beyond the Bible despite internal weaknesses and external threats. And storytelling allows us to see ourselves more clearly and connect with others from different times, places, cultures. We may be used to hearing people comment, "It's only a story," in response to something they hear or read, as if a story were worth far less than history. While there is surely a place for history, it is stories, whether historical or not, that speak to us and for us. As William Reiser writes,

Story is the product of imagination, and we are nothing, if not creatures who have the power to imagine. To think, yes, and to will: but above all, the power to create new worlds and re-create old ones. With imagination there goes memory, and with memory comes tradition. With imagination there are dreams, and with dreaming comes the future.³

As we enter the 21st century, our future as individuals and as a human community depends on our ability to connect with a past and envision a future. Storytelling is one
important bridge between what we remember and what we hope for for ourselves and the next generation.

Though we have come to the end of the Biblical texts, the journey is not over. This journey of a community of God's people continues on in us so long as we recount their stories. Through Second Isaiah, God makes a promise to all who choose to continue the journey: "[E]ven to your old age I am he, even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save" (Isaiah 46:4). While in many ways we indeed follow in the footsteps of the communities of our ancestors, we must also take our own steps, adding onto the story which will live on after us.

1. The dating of the events and the writing of the Bible is often difficult. However, many scholars date Abraham and Sarah, the first "historical" characters in the Bible, to the Middle Bronze Age (2000 - 1500 B.C.E.). Many stories were passed on by oral tradition and may have been first written down as collections during the reign of King Solomon (c. 961 - 922 B.C.E.) with the rise of a learned class. The Old Testament reached its final form in the first century C. E. The New Testament was written over a much shorter period of 75 to 100 years. The Christian canon in the West was closed in the fourth century.


3. While many works prior to the 1960's focus on the development of children (particularly boys), more recent theories give attention to the ongoing growth into middle age and elderhood and try to look seriously at the importance of sex, race, culture, sexual orientation, etc. Among the many theories are: Erik Erikson, Childhood and Society (1963); Jean Piaget, The Moral Judgment of the Child (1965); Daniel Levinson, Season's of a Man's Life (1978); James W. Fowler, Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning (1981); Lawrence Kohlberg, The Philosophy of Moral Development (1981); Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice:
C. H. Dalton: Following in the Footsteps of a Community


5. The first part of the Christian Bible has traditionally been called the Old Testament. Although I will use this name throughout this paper, it is important to realize that "Old Testament" reflects a Christian perspective on the Scriptures. Jews would call almost the same collection of books the Bible or TaNaK. TaNaK is an acronym for the Hebrew words for "Law," "Prophets," and "Writings," the three major categories of Jewish Scripture.

6. I am grateful to the Daughters of Charity in the Philippines who invited me to give a talk entitled "The Biblical Foundations for a Spirituality of the Third Age." Their invitation prompted me to think about the ideas presented here.

7. According to Carol L. Meyers, "Given the risk of death in childbirth . . . it is no wonder that the estimated lifespan for women in ancient Israel, based on the analysis of skeletal remains found in tombs or graves, was about thirty years. Men, spared the dangers of the reproductive process, lived an average of ten years longer" ("Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the Hebrew Bible," The Women’s Bible Commentary, eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe [Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992] 248.)


10. This pattern is also clear in Jesus’ own life. In his book on the Psalms as human expressions of "orientation," "disorientation," and "new orientation," Walter Brueggemann points out this movement in Jesus’ life as recorded in Philippians 2:5-11. See Brueggemann’s The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary
All Biblical quotes are from The New Revised Standard Version.

In this paper I am using the more inclusive term B.C.E. ("Before the Common Era") for the traditional B.C. and C.E. ("Common Era") for A.D.

Here, as in many other places in the Bible, the Biblical story is clearly different from Biblical history. Like our own laws today, many of the Biblical laws emerged and changed over time in response to the concrete needs and realities of a living community. Later laws were then written back into the story of Moses. The distinction between story and history is important to prevent a naive reading of the Bible, though in this paper I am emphasizing the importance of the story.

The judges include Otheniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, and Samson (see Judges). The final judge-like figure is Samuel who plays an important role in the transition to Israel's first king.

Joshua and Judges provide us with two quite different stories about Israel's entrance into Canaan. While Joshua's picture is of a quick military take-over, Judges presents us with a more gradual settlement among the local population. The truth may be some combination of the two. Our own settlement in "a new land" apart from our parents may also be either a quite forceful and direct change or a much slower, step-by-step development.


See 1 Samuel 8–12 for the stories of Saul's anointing. The stories in these chapters reveal significant differences in the attitude toward the establishment of Israel's kingship. Scholars have identified two distinct traditions which they refer to as the "Pro-Kingship Source" and the "Anti-Kingship Source."

See 1 Samuel 13 and 1 Samuel 15 for two different explanations of Saul's rejection. The sins which seemingly lead to his rejection are certainly no worse than some of the sins of David, considered by the Bible to be the greatest king. A plausible explanation of Saul's rejection may be simply his unsuitability for the job of first king. What seems to us today to be a lack of political savvy might have been understood by the editors of the Bible to be a sign of God's rejection.

20. See 1 Kings 1–11 for Solomon's story.

21. To avoid confusion with Israel as a whole community of people, I will use "Israel" to refer to the Northern Kingdom. For stories related to the period of the Divided Kingdom, see 1 Kings 12 – 2 Kings 25.

22. Two notable exceptions are King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:1–20:21) and King Josiah (2 Kings 22 – 23). The Bible tells us that each tries to institute reforms and reconcile Israel with God.

23. Eighth century prophets include Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, and Micah.


27. The Biblical texts give little direct information about the lives of the exiles in Babylon or about those left behind in Judah. However the development of Exile as a theological theme is clearly expressed in later writings.

28. For further development of the goals outlined for midlife (second journey) and elderhood (third journey), see Eugene C. Bianchi, Aging as a Spiritual Journey (New York: Crossroad, 1995).

29. Second Isaiah is the name given to the anonymous 6th century prophet who continues the tradition of the 8th century prophet of that name. Most scholars divide the book of Isaiah into three parts: First Isaiah (Isaiah 1-39), Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55) and Third Isaiah (Isaiah 56-66).

30. All the people did not, however, return to the land of Judah. Prospering Jewish communities remained in Babylonia, Persia, Egypt, Samaria, and Ammon.

31. For the theology and "history" of the Persian Period (539-332 B.C.E.), see also 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Haggai, Zechariah and Third Isaiah are significant prophets of this time.

33. For further discussion about promoters of a more inclusive community, see "Witnesses to an Alternative Vision (Joel, Ruth, and Jonah)" in Hanson's *The People Called*.

34. The later writings are mostly wisdom literature or moral stories rather than the faith-interpreted history we have studied above. Other books from among those known as the Apocrypha continue the community's story through the last two centuries before Jesus. These teaching books further develop our theme of the wisdom of the third journey.

35. The Persian Period lasts from 539 - 332 B.C.E. In 333 B.C.E., Alexander the Great defeats the Persians and takes control of the Near East. After his death in 323 B.C.E., his kingdom is divided and Judea falls into the hands of the Ptolemies (Egypt) and then the Seleucids (Syria). The relatively peaceful ruling of the Seleucids, however, turns severe under the leadership of Antiochus IV Epiphanes who rules from 175 - 164 B.C.E. His attempt to hellenize the Jews gives rise to a revolt in 167 B.C.E. which is led by a family known as the Maccabees.