

# **ENCOURAGING READING**

**Ten Old Testament Studies  
for Presence and Engagement**

*Edited by Michael Ipgrave and Guy Wilkinson*

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## Foreword

These Bible studies were developed in a workshop on the island of Iona in May 2008, convened as part of the work of the Church of England's national 'Presence and Engagement' process. A group of seventeen Christians, of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and involved in different ways in encounter with people of different faiths, gathered together in that holy place for a week to read the scriptures together, to offer one another various approaches to interpreting the passages selected here, and to bring to the texts the experiences and insights of their diverse contexts. All the studies offered here have in this way been piloted with an actual group, albeit in somewhat unusual circumstances, and in their present form revised in the light of that experience.

Great debts of gratitude are owed to Jay MacLeod, who first suggested the idea of a workshop on Iona, and in an act of faith booked Bishop's House a year in advance for that purpose; to Guy Wilkinson, who convened the group and secured the funding which made the event possible; to Alan Amos, who as chaplain to the seminar ensured that the whole process was held in a rhythm of prayer and worship; and to all members of the workshop, who gave generously of their time and wisdom, and did not allow any fear of embarrassment to hold them back from full participation in the experimental sessions. Meeting on Iona, we were conscious of being encouraged in our task by the witness of Columba, his community, and those who have followed in his way; it is with confidence in his continuing prayers that we offer this work in progress to the Church.

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## Introduction

*Michael Ipgrave*

We present here a selection of Bible studies on texts from the Old Testament,<sup>1</sup> designed particularly for use in ‘Presence and Engagement’ settings, i.e. in parishes with a substantial presence of people of different faiths. The set of studies collected here is both modest and experimental in scope. Those who took part in producing these studies were drawn from a broad Christian spectrum: from this country and from the Subcontinent; from catholic, evangelical, and central backgrounds; from women and men; from scholars and practitioners. While our membership was predominantly Anglican, other Christian traditions were also represented, and it is our hope that these studies will be of use ecumenically.

We have neither tried to include every Old Testament text that has relevance to ‘Presence and Engagement’ parishes, nor attempted to present an overall account of the Old Testament’s approach to inter-religious questions. Rather, we have chosen a number of texts of different kinds, approached by different methods, to illustrate some of the possible ways in which the Old Testament can resource the Church in this area. The passages were chosen from a substantial ‘long list’ but without pretensions to a systematic framework of rigorous criteria. We have aimed for a balance across a number of the different genres represented in the Old Testament; there are passages which clearly lend themselves directly to multi-faith contexts, while the connection of others is less immediately obvious; there are ‘hard’ passages which challenge the risk of smuggling modern assumptions, whether liberal or conservative, into our readings of the text, and other passages which resonate instantly with contemporary presuppositions. We are conscious that we have not entirely achieved all these balances, in terms either of the texts selected or the interpretative approaches adopted. This underlines the fact that we see this as the first fruits of a work in progress. What we offer here is a starter set to encourage a constructive response and reaction. It is our hope to produce further studies of this kind, and we would welcome contributions from others to add to the resources available for ministry and mission in ‘Presence and Engagement’ type parishes.

The studies could be made available in a number of different ways in such parishes – for example, in the context of worship, as material for an established series of group meetings, or at events particularly focused on Presence and Engagement themes. They could also be of use in deanery, diocesan or other wider contexts for training programmes or study days. We hope also that they will be of interest in places where the visible presence of other faith communities is not marked; the impact of inter-religious questions extends to every part of our society and our world, and therefore it must be of concern to every part of our Church.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term ‘Old Testament’ here to refer to the first part of the Christian Bible, as this is a title sanctioned by the Church’s long-standing tradition from apostolic times (2 Cor 3.14) and by contemporary usage. For a discussion of the limitations of this language and proposal of an alternative terminology, see the following piece by Tim Butlin and Patrick Morrow.

## **What is 'Presence and Engagement'?**

'Presence and Engagement' is a nationwide process of research, consultation and resourcing, agreed and supported by General Synod, which focuses on the needs and opportunities of parishes in the Church of England where 10% or more of the population is (according to the 2001 Census) of another faith.<sup>2</sup> Parishes like this together cover nearly a quarter of the English population, and only four of the Church's dioceses have no such parishes. The 'Presence and Engagement' context, while very specific to some localities, is thus of real significance for the whole Church. The two words chosen to summarise the process speak of a commitment to maintain Christian presence in these often challenging places, and of a readiness to engage with the opportunities that they present.

While 'Presence and Engagement' parishes have in common the visible presence of other faith communities, in other respects they differ considerably from one another. In some, the Christian presence is small and struggling; in others, it is growing and energetic. In some, religious and racial differences broadly coincide; in others, both the Christian and other communities are marked by great ethnic diversity. In many parishes, Islam is the major 'other faith'; in several, the biggest groups are Hindus, Sikhs or Jews. Across the whole range of parishes, however, the 'Presence and Engagement' consultation found three themes emerging repeatedly: identity, confidence and sustainability. We hope that these Bible studies can be seen as an affirmative way of helping people reflect on these themes in their own context, and so help to equip them for ministry and mission.

Even in those parishes where there are no actual communities of other faiths, there is nevertheless a very significant 'virtual' presence as a result of media representations, particularly of Islam and of Muslims. Many, perhaps most, individuals and congregations engage with other faiths at one or more remove, with little or no experience of personal or communal inter faith relationships. This means that the 'Presence and Engagement' parishes have a vital role in offering to the wider Church insights and reflections from their lived experience. We believe that both types of parish have much to gain from Bible studies of the kind offered here.

## **Why study the Old Testament?<sup>3</sup>**

The Old Testament is often seen as of little importance to Christian faith today, and in some churches it may only rarely be used in worship or teaching. We think it is important to reclaim the place of the Old Testament in church life, particularly in Presence and Engagement parishes, and it is for this reason that we have produced these studies. As we have worked on these texts, we have been struck by the way in which they speak to the whole range of human life – to individuals, families, and societies; in times of stability and of disruption; in promise and warning, in reassurance and rebuke; strengthening convictions and undermining assumptions. We have also been struck by the way in which what we should now refer to as the multi faith context of the Old Testament is all pervasive,

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<sup>2</sup> *Presence and Engagement: The Churches' Task in a Multi-Faith Society* (General Synod of the Church of England, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> See also the comments of Tim Butlin and Patrick Morrow, which follow this introduction. It is remarkable that Butlin and Morrow, starting from very different theological positions in relation to Judaism, can agree a common articulation of the relevance of the Old Testament for Christians.

providing the normal backdrop to all the genres of its literature— law, prophecy, history, psalms, wisdom.

Modern Christians will sometimes shy away from the Old Testament because they feel that it is too violent, or too ethically difficult, or too patriarchal, or too ethnically prejudiced. These are issues about which people in our world today feel strongly; and it is not possible to avoid them when reading Old Testament texts, as some of the passages presented here show. At times, contemporary readers will find themselves strongly challenged, even alienated, by particular passages. At other times, as we have tried to show here, an attentive and engaged reading of the texts can highlight alternatives, raise questions, and even subvert apparent meanings.

Another factor leading to disdain for the Old Testament has been the feeling that it is superseded by Christ and by Christianity, in such a way that it no longer has real authority or interest for Christians. There are indeed many senses in which the teaching of Jesus and the Christian faith go beyond what can be found in the Hebrew scriptures, but the Church has always strongly resisted any attempt to disintegrate the two parts of the Christian Bible. The New Testament itself is clearly built on the Old Testament in a way parallel to, though different from, that of post-Biblical rabbinic Judaism; we have found at several points that our Bible studies were enriched by the methods and insights of Jewish exegesis. It is only possible to understand Jesus, both in his faithfulness and in his newness, through getting to know the Old Testament, which was scripture for him and remains scripture for us. Jesus himself told the story of a rich man who throughout his life ignored all that scripture told him about his responsibilities towards his poor neighbour. He finished the story with a telling reminder of the continuing importance of those scriptures in the Church's teaching: 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead'. (Lk 16.31)

### **How do we approach the Bible?**

Christians in general hold widely differing views of the status of the Bible, and Anglicans are no exception. For some, its texts possess an immediacy of authority to which the only response is one of simple acceptance. Others will approach passages with a more critical spirit, reading between the lines and looking for the cracks in a straightforward approach. Different parts of the Old Testament may require different approaches, and a wide range can be found in the studies collected here. While some texts naturally speak in categorical terms, others seem to be more open to ambiguity. It is interesting to note that similar differences can be found in the scriptures of other religions too.

Whatever approach is used, the purpose of studying the Bible in the life of a Christian community is not just to ascertain the original meaning of a text, even if that can be found. We encourage people to discover what it is that the Spirit is saying to them in their own context through these texts, and in order to do that there needs to be a full engagement of the imagination at every level with the scriptures. While accurate historical information, such as is provided in these studies, is important to help understand the background of the passages being studied, people need to be given permission and encouragement to engage with the text freely and creatively through their hopes, fears, loves and resentments. This does not mean that anything and everything can be read into the scripture, but it does mean that leaders should not stifle the process of engagement at an early stage by

dismissing people's views. It may often end up being the case that in these studies radically different readings of a text emerge from one group; it is through the dialogue of meaning and counter-meaning that the mind of the Church is formed in the process of interpretation.

### **How should these studies be used?**

Each of these studies contains a great deal of information, and each suggests a number of ways of engaging with the texts. Leaders or facilitators will have to think carefully how best to use all this material, and they may well want to spread the study over several sessions. We would strongly suggest that those taking part in the study are prepared in advance, being given the texts well ahead of the session so that they are not wholly unfamiliar to them. When the text is studied, it is good to allow plenty of time for people to read it through carefully and attentively together – preferably reading aloud – so that it can speak to people in all its richness, power and complexity.

Different texts call for different methods of study, as we have shown in this collection. Several passages, particularly those which have a narrative form, are approached through asking people to take on the identity of different characters in the text. Exercises of this kind, precisely because they engage people's imaginations so directly, can sometimes trigger intense emotional associations and reactions from people, and it is important for leaders to help the group take responsibility for the pastoral issues involved. Individuals should not feel that they have to bear the burden of painful or sensitive questions alone, and particular care and time needs to be given to how people come back 'out of role'. Prayer plays an important part in holding this process securely before God.

### **What next?**

We provide studies of ten different texts in this initial selection; we hope groups that have engaged with one will want to move on to try another. Moreover, as 'Presence and Engagement' parishes and other groups become aware of the richness of the material in the Old Testament that speaks to their situation, we hope they will move on to look at further passages. We warmly welcome any examples of studies on other texts; our hope is to build a growing resource of use to the whole church. We are also aware that there are other ways of engaging with the scriptures imaginatively which we have not touched on here – through art, for instance, or music and drama; we would be glad to hear of examples of this kind.

As these Bible studies are intended to resource the local church for ministry and mission, we also hope that they can issue in practical action and relationship-building. Sometimes this may take the form of addressing an immediate issue in the local neighbourhood; sometimes it may result in getting to know better the members of another faith community within a parish; sometimes it will challenge us to engage in evangelism, at other times in dialogue. When we do engage in these ways with our local communities, it is good to keep bringing our activities back into the context of Bible study, so that scriptural text and contemporary context both read and interpret and one another. It may also happen that Christians find opportunities for reading their scriptures alongside the scriptures of other faiths and in the company of people of other faiths. This practice, known as 'Scriptural Reasoning', can provide a very effective way of sustaining and deepening inter faith dialogue. Some practical resources for Scriptural Reasoning, and for other ways of studying the Old Testament in a Presence and Engagement context, are given at the end of these studies.



## **‘Why Bother?’**

### **For those who ask whether the Old Testament is Christian Scripture worth studying**

*Tim Butlin and Patrick Morrow*

The Old Testament as a resource for *Presence and Engagement*? To many the very idea will seem ridiculous. That ‘the Old Testament God’ is one of exclusiveness, wrath, and violence, is a commonplace, which still trips off the tongue of many, in as much as we still speak about the ‘Old Testament’ at all. So it is worth taking stock, and saying that the idea that ‘the Old Testament God’ is somehow different from the ‘New Testament God’ is not and cannot be Christian. For Christians, there only is one God, who has revealed the singular Divine nature over time. And the story of the Old Testament is the story of the merciful God, whose mercy outstrips his judgement. For that matter, the New Testament is not blandly forgiving. Remember all the language of ‘the wailing and gnashing of teeth’. The Book of Revelation is as judgemental and violent as anything in the Old Testament.

We know that what we call Christian orthodoxy developed over time, and, with its language of Incarnation and Trinity, it can seem to be quite different from the simple belief in the Oneness of God of the Old Testament. And yet! And yet even the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), which gave us much of the language of orthodoxy, said that in Jesus God becomes a human being ‘without change’. God’s presence in Jesus *does not change God*. It is not that God was first angry, but through Jesus is made forgiving. It is not even that God was first hidden, and through Jesus is revealed. God has a history in the world before Jesus. So God is revealed in the story of the Old Testament, and revealed the more clearly in the story of the New Testament. Indeed, in Jesus we see the ‘final’ revelation of God – not that religious history or world history has nothing left to say after about 33 CE, but that all that is said is an elucidation on the love of God come to us in Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

If the message of the New Testament is of a God come to us ‘without change’, then it must be still worth honouring and valuing the Old Testament as Scripture. ‘The God of the Old Testament’ unreservedly *is* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We may want to criticise, forcefully, aspects of the Old Testament text. But when we do so, we are doing essentially the same as we do when we cannot agree with an aspect of the New Testament text. We may find more that is difficult in the Old Testament than the New. But it is worth reminding ourselves of one simple fact: the Old Testament is many times longer than the New. It is not half the Christian Bible; it is more like four-fifths. Its scope is also broader – from the creation of the world, to the creation of a nation, the people Israel, and to all that a nation has to face, and to its religious practices over centuries. The New Testament, in contrast, concerns one smallish religious group, without national power, or any of the power of belonging to the establishment, over less than a century. It might actually be helpful to think that the Old Testament thus poses questions for us which the New

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<sup>1</sup> That we set out this relationship in no way implies that the Hebrew Bible is only Christian Scripture. It can be rabbinical Jewish Scripture in no less a sense.

Testament happened not to face. To say 'That is only the Old Testament' is thus to avoid the issues which the Old Testament had no choice but to face.

So, 'the God of the Old Testament' is 'the Christian God', who comes to us in Jesus, but 'without change'. The Old Testament covers such a breadth (and a depth) of issues that it is worth studying on its own terms (in as much as fallible and biased human beings can ever study anything 'on its own terms'). It is worth noting an irony here: those who have the tradition of studying 'the Old Testament on its own terms' are overwhelmingly Christian; it is not something that Jews have traditionally done. Jews of course treat the Hebrew Bible as Scripture, and revere the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, especially. But to study the text of Torah without recourse to the later Mishnah, Talmud and *midrash* has played no real part in Jewish religious life, and is a minority interest among Jewish academics. There is a sense for them that all of the later Jewish literature is itself also 'Torah'. So, while there is no distinction between 'Old' and 'New', there is between the 'Written' and the 'Oral' Torah, which means one can understand the former only by reference to the latter.

Christians might have great sympathy with this 'organic' approach. The trouble is that we have such a history of treating the 'Old Testament' as being the story of (frankly) 'the old god, the god we do not have to trouble ourselves with', that it must be worth setting out on the adventure of treating the Old Testament as Christian Scripture, to read it with that kind of attention and expectation, and see what the Spirit is saying to the churches, through this often neglected resource.

The question of labels cannot be ignored here. There are different, but related problems:

(i) For Jews, the Hebrew Bible is not the 'Old Testament'. It is the only written Testament. In dialogue with Jews, there is no need to cause offence by speaking of the 'Old Testament', when the title 'Hebrew Bible' is comprehensible and unexceptional to all Christians.

(ii) Part of the offence caused by calling these Scriptures the 'Old Testament' is that the label 'old' has come to feel negative in the contemporary world. Good things are 'new, improved' or 'brand new'. Nothing is ever marketed as 'old' (although some of us have vague memories of an aftershave which might have been – in the olden days). This is different from the world of antiquity, where the presumption was that the old is good and the new is suspect.<sup>2</sup> The same thing in a different place is a different thing. So if 'Old' now means 'worn-out', 'stale', then there are strong reasons for not using it to refer to God's self-revelation in the Hebrew Bible. And it is vital to note that this is true for reasons which have nothing to do with causing possible offence to religious Jews. It is worth doing on its own, 'in-house' terms.

(iii) When today the marketers want to market something that is old, they call it instead 'original'. It is instructive to see what difference this makes to our case. If we call the Hebrew Scriptures 'the Original Scriptures' we immediately do away with the sense that they are worn-out, passed it. We also suggest a dynamic between the original and the new, which is exactly what we as Christians do believe. If it is impossible for a Christian to read

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<sup>2</sup> We are talking about different attitudes of mind in the contemporary and ancient world. Naturally, sometimes this was inverted, as in 2 Cor or in Heb. We cannot offer a serious reading of these references here, but the point is still valid if we just say 'old' has come more and more to mean 'outmoded'.

devotionally the Old Testament without the New, it is just as impossible to read the New Testament without the Original. The New Testament is simply saturated with quotations, references, allusions and echoes of the Original.

(iv) There are various defences of the terminology 'the Old Testament'. One is ancient and one is modern. The ancient is that the Old Testament is a resource to be plundered for any possible reference to Christ. It is a text which is important only in terms of its prophecies of Christ and its portrayal of types of Christ. The modern version is that the Old Testament is just background reading, the Scripture which Jesus would have used, yes, but which historical-criticism has dissected, so that we now see it as a rag-bag of ancient Israelite ideologies. It is worth saying that neither of these two approaches is entirely credible today. So we can be glad that we are free to read the Original Testament (!) for what it seems to be saying to us.

(v) We are not wholly at sea, when we try to see what the Original Testament seems to be saying. It is the story of God's interaction with God's people. That may sound like unexceptional sermonic language. But it is startling, and important. It is the story of God. It is not the story of 'theism' or 'monotheism', of human beings managing to work out that there happens to be just one deity. But it is the story of God, who takes the initiative, including the initiative of all initiatives, namely creating the world. It is the story of God whose call is real, persistent and unavoidable, the story of God who is in all senses unique. And, with that, it is the story of God who calls a people – a people who come to be 'Israel' first, and 'the Jews' second – and God who interacts with them. It is the story of God who longs for real relationship with real people, and with a real people. To put it at its simplest, it is the story of God who is close. God is not a human being, and God does not think like human beings think or act like human beings act. In that sense, God is transcendent. But that does not mean God is distant. From God's presence, walking in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day, calling out to Eve and Adam, 'where are you?' to all the ups and downs of God's never-unemotional relationship with Israel, God is *close*, and God's ways (as the Deuteronomist says) are not so much in heaven but with God's people on earth.

(vi) In any real relationship, things change over time. Thus it is perfectly reasonable to say that (as we now have it) the story of the closeness of God begins with Genesis, and changes when Sarah and Abraham are called, when Israel comes out of Egypt and comes into its own at Sinai, when David makes the anointed monarchy his, when the cleansing of the exile happens, and when Jesus Christ comes as the consummation of all of this (though in many ways he is the surprising consummation – the secret Messiah!). But we, who come at the end of this story, can still learn about the nature of the closeness of God by hearing about earlier family stories.

In sum, the 'Old' or Original Testament *must* be a resource for Presence and Engagement. It is not the sole source. Perhaps it will not 'solve' any particular 'problems' on its own. But the same might be said of any of the strands which make up Christian thinking about God, humanity and truth. It is, after all, the bulk of the Biblical story of God's own presence and engagement, which demand the presence and engagement of God's people, in the presence and with the engagement of others.

## Study 1: Genesis 16, 21

### Hagar and Abraham, The 'Middle East-Enders'

Clare Amos

#### Introduction

'God's friend'. Abraham is called by this attractive title in both the Old Testament (Is 41.8) and the New (Jas 2.23). A similar description is given in the Qur'ān: 'God took Abraham for a friend.' (*al-Nisā'* 4) Three religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam traditionally claim Abraham as their spiritual father. Together they are frequently known as the 'Abrahamic faiths'. Yet too often each of the three has claimed Abraham as their exclusive possession – and in doing so has tried to invalidate the claims of the others. In seeking ourselves to be the 'children of Abraham' we have tried to make others illegitimate. One needs only to look at the bitter argument in John 8 to glimpse how the figure of Abraham can be used polemically – and in a way that has scarred Jewish-Christian history throughout the last two thousand years. That is tragic – not least if we remember how Abraham is first introduced to us in the Book of Genesis: as the recipient of a threefold promise to him by God which ends with the words, 'in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Gen 12.3).

But were the seeds of this bitter history sown within the Old Testament itself, in the stories of Abraham and his family which dominate the middle section (chapters 12-25) of the Book of Genesis? As we shall discover, looking particularly at narratives which focus on the figures of Hagar and her son Ishmael and Sarah and her son Isaac, the repercussions of what happens in these chapters will affect the family of Abraham for generations to come. Indeed the ambiguous relationship at the present time between Islam and the other two 'Abrahamic faiths' could be said, at least in part, to stem from the events these chapters describe. The title, 'The Middle East-Enders', that I have chosen for this set of Bible studies is deliberately evocative of a certain well-known TV series. When the first draft of the studies was trialled in the working-group that produced them the instinctive response was 'This feels like being part of a soap-opera!' And just as in a soap-opera the doings of one generation affect, for good or ill, those who will appear in the future, so too a careful reading of the later chapters of Genesis makes it clear that the lives of the descendants of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar remain powerfully affected by what took place in the time of Abraham.<sup>1</sup>

However, even if the seeds of hostility were sown in these chapters, do the stories also offer us scope for reconciliation and healing? How do they help us answer positively the crucial question: 'Can those who venerate Abraham as the friend of God be friends of one another?' On our answer to this question may depend the health and peace of our world today.

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<sup>1</sup> Note, for example, that it is the descendants of Ishmael that carry off Joseph, the favoured son of Jacob and great-grandson of Abraham, into slavery in Egypt.

The particular focus of these studies is the stories of Hagar and her son Ishmael. Along with Abraham himself, both Hagar and Ishmael are figures who are especially honoured by Muslims. Abraham is praised on many occasions within the Qur'ān as a prophet, for his devotion to God, his monotheism and his hospitality. As for Hagar, although she does not appear in the Qur'ān itself, elements of her story surface in ancient Islamic traditions. One of these traditions tells us how, while Hagar was suckling Ishmael, Abraham left her and the baby in the Zam-zam valley near the Ka'bah in Mecca. He gave her simply a bag of dates and a small bottle of water, but hearing that God had commanded Abraham to leave her there, with strong faith Hagar comments that 'God will not neglect us'. When the water was finished, Hagar ran to and fro looking for water until she saw an angel digging the earth and the Zam-zam spring appeared. It is this ordeal of Hagar's that is commemorated by Muslim pilgrims as part of the ritual of the *hajj*, running to and fro, following Hagar's example. Ishmael himself is mentioned within the Qur'ān. He is a prophet, a good man, and the builder of the mosque in Mecca, and thus a major spiritual figure for the Muslim community. Although the Qur'ān itself does not spell out exactly which son Abraham almost sacrificed in obedience to God's command, later Muslim writings have understood this 'sacrificed son' to be Ishmael. This of course differs from Genesis 22, which presents Isaac as the potential victim.

These Bible studies use tales of the family of Abraham to delve into a number of key issues that may arise as Christians live in 'Presence and Engagement' contexts, or seek to explore their relationship with people of the other Abrahamic faiths. These include:

- How should we respond to the 'outsider' in situations in which there is an imbalance of power?
- How are women treated in different social and cultural contexts?
- How do we understand the biblical understanding of chosenness in a world of many faiths?
- What might these stories suggest to us about our relationship with members of the Islamic faith?
- Do these stories offer any insight into a Christian response to the current situation in Israel / Palestine?
- What might these stories suggest to us about our relationship with members of the Jewish faith?
- How can we use the Bible as a moral guide?
- Why should we, as Christians seek to engage in dialogue with people of other faiths?

The studies have been designed so that you will be able to do one or more of them, depending on the time available and the context you are working in. They are designed in 'stages' so that each of the studies in turn digs a little deeper than the previous one. In some contexts it might be appropriate simply to use the first study (on Gen 16.1-9), or perhaps the first and the second (Gen 16.9-16). In other situations you might wish to use the whole

series – either as part of an ongoing weekly Bible study group, or perhaps providing a resource for a day course spent exploring issues such as those listed above.

### **Practical notes**

*The studies have been designed to be used by a group working with a facilitator. The facilitator will need to have read beforehand the various Bible passages to be studied and to have looked at each of the 'Brief notes for facilitators'. These notes are designed to enable the facilitator help the group to see the 'wider story'. The content of them should not be shared with the whole group until the final section of each study when the whole group comes together. The facilitator may then want to use some of the comments in the notes to draw out threads and ideas that the group could reflect on.*

*Since the Bible studies also involve a considerable amount of role play on the part of the participants, the facilitator will need to find ways to help the participants en-role and de-role. It might be appropriate to ask people to wear labels designating their 'role' e.g. 'Sarah', 'Hagar', 'Abraham' etc. It is also important however to give people a chance to de-role. It can be upsetting and uncomfortable for people to discover (as these Bible studies suggest) that those we have venerated as 'heroes of the faith' clearly do seem to have feet of clay, and it is appropriate to offer people the opportunity to share feelings about this.*

*Ideally all participants will need to have a Bible with them. Although each study focuses on a specific passage in Genesis (which could be photo-copied for each person), the notes and questions draw attention to other parts of the story of Genesis which may shed light on the passage concerned. It would be helpful therefore if participants can have Bibles available.*

## Stage One

*Read Genesis 16.1-6.together using different voices (Narrator, Sarai, Abram)*

*Divide people up into three groups. One group represents Abram (Abraham), one group represents Sarai (Sarah), one group represents Hagar.*

*Give each group the relevant soap-notes (informative comments deliberately written in soap-opera style!) and the appropriate set of questions:*

### **Soap-notes for Abram**

I agree that it wasn't my greatest moment – but then what was I to do? No sooner had Sarai and I arrived in Canaan from Haran than a famine started. Down we went to Egypt – everyone knows that Egypt is the bread-basket of our region – to try and get food. But Pharaohs – they are notoriously autocratic and unpredictable and think they can have anything or anyone that they lay their eyes on! Sarai was well into her 60s by that time, but she was still a very attractive looking woman. I could see that Pharaoh was smitten. It seemed the safest thing to say that she was my sister. I have to say that I wasn't expecting Pharaoh to pop her into his harem, but once I had started on my story I had to stick to it. Mind you I don't think Sarai has ever quite forgiven me.

Well, there was Sarai in the harem, so I felt I had to stick around. I couldn't abandon her in Egypt now could I? And then everybody seemed to get ill – all of a sudden and together. Pharaoh seemed to think that this was because he had displeased God for some reason. He hauled me in for questioning, and I felt I had to tell him the truth. I thought that was me – and Sarai – done for. But no, something had scared the living daylights of him. He had decided that I was somehow under the special protection of a God that he was afraid of – in spite of the fact that, as you know, Pharaoh is the most powerful man in the world. So he released Sarai and sent her and me off in a hurry. He didn't want to send us empty handed either: he loaded us with lots of gifts, camels, treasures – and slaves, both male and female. Some of them are pretty good looking! So it was back to Canaan and a lot richer than when we had left it.

### **Soap-notes for Sarai**

I don't think I will ever quite be able to forgive Abram for what he did to me and the situation he put me in. I never want to go through such an awful experience again. After all we had been through together I would never have dreamed that he could have lied about our relationship – pretending that I was his sister instead of his wife. Yes I know that we are indeed related – quite close kin in fact in fact. But I am Abram's wife, I want to say that loud and clear. Some people think that because I haven't been able to bear him a son, that somehow we don't have a 'proper' marriage. I did wonder if that was why he did it – somehow he was trying to get rid of me.

I know that Pharaoh fancied me – I am not stupid. Some women would be flattered by the attention of the most powerful man on earth. But not me. I knew what I wanted and I knew that my destiny was intertwined with that of Abram, no matter how badly he treated me, and however ready he was just to hand me over to Pharaoh. I was just thankful that during the time I spent in Pharaoh's harem I was indeed barren. Then suddenly it all changed – everybody started getting sick and Pharaoh felt that it was something to do with me and Abram. He was only too pleased to let us go – pushed us out of his country with presents galore. I had never had a handmaid before – but she was one of Pharaoh's gifts. So it

seemed somehow appropriate that when my apparent inability to give Abram a son finally drove me to despair, that I should suggest that she, that handmaid from Egypt, should substitute for me in Abram's bed. It seemed an appropriate 'return' for what Abram had previously done to me.

### **Soap-notes for Hagar**

I still don't know why Pharaoh let them get away with it. In my book they were both as bad as the other. The man lied about the fact that the woman was his sister – and the woman let him do so. And it almost brought disaster upon my country. Pharaoh, our king, felt that the gods must be angry with him for taking the man's wife, even though he had done so without realising it. But he not only released them, he loaded them with gifts before sending them out of Egypt. And I was one of the gifts! That is why I am here with them in Canaan, the land from which they had originally come from. It was due to their deception that I have had to leave my country, my family, everything I had previously known, to come here and serve these strangers. Sometimes they treat me fine, but often when the woman gets particularly upset at the fact that she hasn't been able to give the man a child, she seems to take it out on me. I am so much younger than she is, and my very youth seems to her to be an insult that at times she cannot bear. But she doesn't realise how powerless I feel in turn, and how much I long to see my own people again. If I could I would run away – run home.

### **Questions for Abram**

1. How does Hagar happen to be in your entourage? (Perhaps you can find the answer in Gen 12.10-20.) How did you feel about 'acquiring' her in this way?
2. How did you feel when Sarah suggested that you take Hagar as an additional wife?
3. Do you think that it was a good idea to 'listen to the voice of Sarah'? (literal translation of verse 2)
4. How did you feel when Hagar became pregnant?
5. How did you feel when she ran away?
6. Centuries after your time people will read about your situation: who do you think will be particularly sympathetic to you?

### **Questions for Sarai**

1. How did Hagar come to be in your entourage? (Perhaps you can find the answer in Gen 12.10-20.)
2. What are your feelings about the incident that led to Hagar being part of your entourage?
3. Why did you make the suggestion to your husband that he might 'take' Hagar as an additional wife?
4. Do you think that it was a good thing that he 'listened to your voice'?
5. How did you feel when Hagar became pregnant? How did you feel when she ran away?



6. Centuries after your time people will read about your situation: who do you think will be particularly sympathetic to you?

### **Questions for Hagar**

1. How did you come to be a slave-girl of Abraham and Sarah? (Perhaps you can find the answer in Gen 12.10-20.)

2. How did you feel about becoming a slave-girl in this way?

3. What did you think of Sarah's suggestion that Abraham take you as an additional wife?

4. How did you feel when you became pregnant? How did you behave towards Sarah and she behave towards you?

5. Do you feel that your voice has been heard in the story so far?

6. Centuries after your time people will read about your situation: who do you think will be particularly sympathetic to you?

### **Either**

*Invite the groups to come together and share their responses to the questions.*

*Listen to each group in turn.*

*Invite each group to formulate one question that it wishes to ask each of the other groups. Ask the questions – and listen to the response.*

### **Or**

*Organise a series of 'visits' between the groups e.g. a members of the Abram group to visit each of the Hagar and Sarai groups, members of the Hagar group to visit the Abram and Sarai groups, members of the Sarai group to visit the Abram and Hagar groups, in which the responses can be shared and questions can be asked in a less structured way.*

*Whichever method you choose all should eventually come together to de-role and to discuss:*

- What challenges does this biblical story offer us so far?
- What have we learned from this story that is relevant to us in our contexts and situation?

*If you are doing this study as part of an ongoing series it may be useful at this point to record comments to remind people when you next meet about what has been said.*

### **Brief commentary for facilitators**

The story of Abram, Sarai and their slave-girl Hagar can be 'read' at a number of different levels. On one plane it presents us with a tale about difficult human relationships, and frames for us basic questions of justice – particularly in situations where there is an imbalance of power. That is the 'level' at which we are reading the story so far. It has sometimes been noted that while many western women tend to empathise with Sarai –

women from Africa and Asia often identify with Hagar. That might come out in the responses to the question asked of each character, 'Who do you think will be sympathetic to you?' Another issue that may provoke comment is the gender relations in the story: are each of Abram, Sarai and Hagar trapped by the expectation – still prevalent in many parts of the world – that the primary task of a woman is to bear children and that she is a failure if she cannot do so? Intriguingly of course it is actually Sarai who makes the suggestion to Abram that he should 'use' Hagar in this particular way. The narrator's comment 'And Abraham listened to the voice of Sarai' sounds innocuous enough, yet significantly in Genesis whenever a person listens to the voice of someone other than God trouble seems to lie ahead. Thus Adam listened to the voice of Eve (3.17) and ate the fruit, and Jacob listened to the voice of Rebecca his mother (27.13) and deceived his father. One voice that does not seem to be listened to in the story so far is that of Hagar. Though Abram and Sarai are granted direct speech in 16.1-6, Hagar tellingly is not. Her first words in the story will come in 16.8, spoken to the angel, and will verbalise her fear. The first question to each of the groups links the present episode to events earlier in the story of Abram. This wider picture will be explored shortly – for now making that connection simply acts as a reminder that actions do not exist in isolation. They live in a spiral of cause and effect.

**Issues linked to the 'Presence and Engagement' context** that might be raised through the discussion could include: migrant workers and refugees; human trafficking; the position of women in some cultures; the importance of children.

*Please note: In a number of 'Presence and Engagement' contexts the story may provoke reaction from participants who have current or fairly recent experience of polygamy in their families. This will need sensitive handling by the facilitator.*

### **Closing prayer**

Abba, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ:  
You have graced us with the spirit of freedom,  
and the privilege of calling upon you by name.  
May we use this precious freedom  
to give a voice to all who are enslaved  
by poverty or persecution,  
held captive by discrimination or disease.  
Grant us courage to name injustice wherever it appears,  
and to speak your Word of truth,  
sure that the love of God in Christ Jesus has power  
to set all people free,  
enabling them to live in glorious liberty,  
as your cherished sons and daughters.  
Amen

## Stage Two

*Read Genesis 16.7-16, again using various voices. The facilitator should explain to the group that one of the features of Genesis is the importance it gives to names – both for human beings and for God. Names often mean something and enable us to understand the role and character of a person in the biblical story.*

*Divide into the three groups as previously, giving them the relevant soap-notes and the appropriate set of questions. The facilitator might want to ask people to continue in the same roles as they had in 'Stage One' or to ask them to change roles.*

### **Soap-notes for Abram**

I don't know why I let Sarai persuade me. I had a bad feeling about the idea from the start. Perhaps I felt I owed it to her after all I had put her through in Egypt all those years ago. But listening to the voice of a woman and following their suggestions – that is where Adam went wrong all those years ago. I feel that I may just have repeated his mistake all over again!

Sarai's childlessness had led her to such a situation of despair that she wanted me to bed her handmaid in the hope that the handmaid could give me a son, which somehow Sarai thought might belong to her as well. She handed the maid over to me. I have to say it wasn't a hardship. And it worked – or at least what we hoped for happened almost straight away. Hagar got pregnant. But then things began to go wrong – certainly not as Sarai had intended. Hagar's pregnancy changed the power balance in their relationship. Suddenly Hagar seemed to be calling all the shots: whenever Sarai asked her to do something Hagar would respond with a lazy and insolent glance: 'I have got to rest, to look after 'your' child, haven't I?' The relationship between the two of them had always been a bit tense and uneasy, but now it really got bad. Sarai got torn in two: she wanted Hagar to stay healthy for the sake of my child – our child – but then there were times when her self-control just went and she would lash out and hit the maid. I tried to stop her – I really did – but it was women's business somehow and I didn't want to get involved. I knew she wasn't treating Hagar fairly – but what could I do? Finally after one beating too many Hagar just disappeared – she had had enough and run away. And all I could think was, 'All this was so that I could have a son, and now I have lost him after all, because I don't expect we shall be seeing that Egyptian woman again.' Yet some weeks later she reappeared. She had changed somehow; I don't know what had happened while she was away ...

### **Soap-notes for Sarai**

I reckoned Abram owed it to me – even though he wasn't at all keen on the idea. But after what he had put me through in Egypt, I felt I had the right to call a few shots! And it was sort of rough justice that it was an Egyptian woman that was going to be the instrument of my getting what I had always wanted – a son, for both Abram and myself. So I made the suggestion that he take the woman to his bed, and hopefully something would happen. And it did. After all the years I had been trying for a child with Abram, it seemed almost unfair (even though I also wanted it!) that she should conceive immediately. And when that happened – how she shifted her manner! It was no longer 'Yes, madam, how can I help you, madam?' but complaints and moans whenever I asked her to do anything. She was always too tired, because she was carrying 'your' child, as she put it to me. What insolence! And the less she did to help me, the more she seemed to have the time to doll herself up, to make her eyes black and beautiful. I could see what she was aiming at – she thought that if she played her cards right she might be able to replace me in my husband's bed permanently. I

know that I shouldn't have lashed out at her, but one day she just went too far. And I gave her one – or two. She went very quiet. That night she ran away, and once again my feelings were mixed, mixed-up. It was a relief not to have to look at her, her growing belly seemed to be a constant reproach to me. Yet the whole point of what I had done had been to give Abram a son, and now that hope had vanished.

But a few weeks later she came back. She said very little about what had happened while she had been away. She didn't look exactly pleased to be back – but somehow resigned, and accepting of whatever was going to happen.

### **Soap-notes for Hagar**

I didn't have any say in the matter. The old woman told me to share the old man's bed and get her a child. And yes, it was going to be 'her' child. She made that clear. She didn't seem to have any idea of what she was asking. After all she had never been a mother. It was bad enough that I had been torn from my family, handed over to accompany them out of Egypt as human baggage. Now when the possibility had come of having a new family, a child of my own, it would be stolen from me, just as I had been stolen from Egypt. How could I prevent that happening? But I began to realise that my pregnancy gave me a sort of power; perhaps I could use it to my advantage. Perhaps the old man would prefer me in his bed in the future too? By bearing his child perhaps I would no longer be 'slave' to him and the old woman. My dreams took hold – I tried to imagine what it would be like as his 'wife'. I dressed differently, I took care of myself. I began to want the child – to rest in the determination to ensure that it would be brought successfully to birth. The old woman did not like it. One day she hit me hard, and I was afraid for the safety of the baby. I ran away – away to freedom. I had the idea of trying to get back home to Egypt.

But on my journey something – or someone – stopped me in my tracks. I was resting by a well, having drunk its water, and I had this overpowering sense of not being alone. Was it the spirit of the well – that gave life in the thirsty desert? I do not know. But I think I saw something that day, saw something that would 'see to' me, provide for me and protect me – and my child. It seemed to be telling me to return to where I had come from, and that there I would find our future.

### **Questions for Abram**

1. How did you feel when Hagar told you that the angel had said to her, 'I will so greatly multiply your (Hagar's) offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude (verse 10)? Did it surprise you?
2. How did you feel when Hagar told you that she had seen God? And that she had named God?
3. In Gen 17.4-5 you will be given a new name. What do you think of your new name and its meaning?
4. Nowhere in Genesis is the name of Hagar explained. However it sounds very like the Hebrew word *ha-ger* (= sojourner / resident alien). Anyone thinking of it might well make such a connection. Do you think that this is an appropriate name for Hagar? Have you treated Hagar as you should treat a *ger*?

5. What do you think of the fact that the angel decreed that Hagar's (and your) son should be named 'Ishmael'?
6. What do you think of the fact that you do not speak in this part of the chapter?

### **Questions for Sarai**

1. The angel that Hagar met acknowledged that she had been 'afflicted' by you. Do you think that this was a fair assessment?
2. How did you feel when Hagar told you that she had seen God? And that she had named God?
3. In Gen 17.15 you will be given a new name. It means 'princess'. What do you think of your new name and its meaning?
4. Nowhere in Genesis is the name of Hagar explained. However it sounds very like the Hebrew word *ha-ger* (= sojourner / resident alien). Anyone thinking of it might well make such a connection. Do you think that this is an appropriate name for Hagar? Have you treated Hagar as you should treat a *ger*?
5. What do you think of the fact that the angel decreed that Hagar's son should be named 'Ishmael'?
6. What do you think of the fact that you do not speak in this part of the chapter?

### **Questions for Hagar**

1. How did you feel when you saw God and when God 'announced' the birth of a son to you?
2. How did you dare to name God?
3. How do you feel, as an Egyptian (16.1), about your experiences?
4. Do you feel that God has really 'heard' your affliction? The same God who spoke of your 'affliction' also told you to return to Sarai and 'submit' to her. (In Hebrew the words 'affliction' and 'submit' come from the same Hebrew root). Why do you think that was said to you?
5. How did you feel about the naming of your son as Ishmael, and what the angel tells you about your son?
6. In what ways would you describe your experiences as an 'exodus'?

### ***Either***

*Invite the groups to come together and share their responses to the questions.*

*Listen to each group in turn.*

*Invite each group to formulate one question that it wishes to ask each of the other groups. Ask the questions – and listen to the response.*

**Or**

*Organise a series of 'visits' between the groups, as suggested for Stage One, in which the responses can be shared and questions can be asked in a less structured way.*

*Whichever method you choose all should eventually come together to de-role and together read Gen 15.1-6, 12-14. Note that this passage refers to the descendants of Abram as being 'aliens' (plural of ger) and that they will be 'oppressed'.<sup>2</sup> As a complete group together explore the connection between the words of God to Abram in 15.13-14 and what we have been discovering in chapter 16. Perhaps bear in mind particularly that Hagar is an Egyptian.*

*Then discuss together:*

- What challenges does this biblical story offer us so far?
- What have we learned from this story that is relevant to us in our contexts and situation?

*If you are doing this study as part of an ongoing series it may be useful at this point to record comments to remind people when you next meet about what has been said.*

### **Brief commentary for facilitators**

The second level at which the story of Hagar can be read begins to link us to biblical theology of covenant and chosenness. Hagar is 'the woman who complicated the history of salvation'. That is a graphic description of her offered by the Latin American theologian Elsa Tamez.<sup>3</sup> Literary studies of this section of Genesis have suggested that chapters 12-22 gradually fold in on themselves, to focus our attention on chapter 16 as their 'middle'. So it is not the birth of Isaac, but that of the other son, Ishmael, who lies at the centre of the stories about Abraham in Genesis. That is an important statement of Ishmael's – and Hagar's – role in the story. The sound link between the name of Hagar and the Hebrew *ger* offer an important clue that we must not ignore. Just treatment of the *ger* is one of the key requirements of the covenant as Ex 22.21 suggests: 'You shall not wrong or oppress an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.' Intriguingly, shortly after this commandment we read of God's pledge: '... when they cry out I will surely heed their cry'. Its strange congruence with the meaning of Ishmael's name, 'God will hear' offers another suggestive connection to the story of Hagar and Ishmael. But what of Abram's and Sarai's behaviour towards Hagar so far – if we consider her an archetype of a *ger*. Can their treatment of her really be said to meet the standards required of Abraham's descendants in the laws of Exodus? Surely not – and perhaps this is the explanation for the threatening words we find in 15.13-14. Is there a direct connection between the oppression meted out to Hagar the Egyptian, 'alien' at the mercy of Abram and Sarai, and the oppression that Abraham and Sarah's descendants will endure centuries later as 'aliens' in the land of Egypt? When Hagar and Ishmael reappear a few chapters later Ishmael and Hagar will indeed need to cry out –

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<sup>2</sup> The same Hebrew root that lies behind the words in Chapter 16 translated: 'dealt harshly (verse 6); 'submit' (verse 9); and 'affliction' (verse 11).

<sup>3</sup> Elsa Tamez, in 'New Eyes for Reading,' ed. J. S. Pobee and B. von Wartenberg-Potter (Geneva: WCC 1986; Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian, 1987), 5-17.

and God will hear (21.17). Does that cry of Ishmael, son of the slave-girl, echo down the centuries until it finds its echo in the shouts of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt suffering mistreatment at the hands of Hagar's later compatriots? Might this suggest that a demand for compassion and justice for all aliens is written into the very fabric of the covenant – and that the healthy continuation of God's covenant relationship with Abraham and his family depends on their, and our, willingness to offer justice to others? If so, what does this mean for us and our claim to covenant and chosenness as spiritual descendants of Abraham?

***Issues linked to the 'Presence and Engagement' context*** that might be raised through the discussion could include: (as well as the issues already raised in Stage One): the importance of names, the need for justice and compassion – particularly for the vulnerable; how does the biblical concept of 'chosenness' play out in a multi-faith society?

### **Closing prayer**

Gracious God,  
Friend and Judge of Abraham,  
his innermost conscience:  
You support the stranger  
and give ear to those without a voice:  
Strengthen us to embrace the bond of covenant you have offered us,  
so we may share in the hospitality you provide for all people.  
Liberate us from slavery to fear and hostility,  
enable us to break down barriers of division,  
and raise up places in which to celebrate and rejoice.  
This we ask in the name of Jesus,  
the one who has pitched his tent among us.  
Amen.

### Stage Three

*Read Genesis 21.8-21 using voices for each of Narrator, Abraham, God / angel of God, Hagar. Genesis 22 (the story of the sacrifice of Isaac) is alluded to in the questions below – so you may also want to draw attention to it in some way. (The links between the two narratives are also picked up in the Soap-notes.)*

*Divide people again into three groups. One group represents Abraham, one group represents Sarah / Isaac (invite about half of this group to en-role as Sarah and the other half as Isaac) and one group represents Hagar / Ishmael (again invite about half of this group to en-role as Hagar and the other half as Ishmael).*

#### **Soap-notes for Abraham**

I promise you I didn't want to do it. It wasn't my idea. But things had never really been right ever since Hagar had come back to us, and her child had been born. In fact they had never really been right ever since I had first taken Hagar ... well, let's not go over that again! But although things were uneasy, at least for the first couple of years of Ishmael's life Sarah tried to care for the child. Sometimes she was fiercely possessive of him, he was 'her' son; at other times – especially when he was being a bit wild – she was only too ready to hand him back to Hagar, his birth mother! After all Hagar was a good few years younger, and had a good deal more energy to deal with that rumbustious little boy. I loved him myself. That made it all the more tragic for me, what happened. Unbelievably Sarah herself eventually conceived and produced a son – a few years after Ishmael was born. And her attitude to Ishmael changed completely as a result. Initially she wasn't interested in him any more – her attention was totally focused on Isaac. But then she became downright hostile to the little lad, and found any excuse to complain about him. It all came to a head at Isaac's weaning party. Immediately after that Sarah insisted that we should send Hagar and the lad away – literally push them out of the camp into the wilderness. I tried to persuade her to change her mind, but she insisted. And I felt that just as I had listened to Sarah when she had made the original suggestion that led to Ishmael's birth, so too it was now my duty to listen to this monstrous idea. I didn't send them away empty-handed, I gave Hagar some bread and water, and hoped for the best for her and the child. I still don't know what happened to them ... I can only pray that somewhere out in the wild they found water and perhaps shelter. Some days as I look at Isaac and remember what I did to his brother Ishmael I ask myself, 'What if anything were ever to happen to this precious boy as well, I don't know if I could bear to keep on living ...'

#### **Soap-notes for Sarah / Isaac**

*(Sarah)* I know some people think I was dreadfully cruel, but you must understand that I had no choice. I had to protect my own child. Surely any mother would have felt and done the same? From the moment that Isaac was born I had felt uneasy about his half-brother. Abraham was far too fond of him for Isaac's own good – or mine. And, let's face it, he was only the son of a slave; it wasn't right that he should have such a favoured position in our household. It all came to a head the day that we celebrated the weaning of Isaac, the proper son of Abraham and myself. The slave's son was prancing about, preening himself – he didn't seem to understand his place, and how his situation had changed now that Isaac was growing up. And then when he got rough with my son and started to knock him about – Hagar maintained it was an accident – but I felt I had had enough. He and his mother had to go – and good riddance. Abraham took some convincing but eventually he agreed. I was so



relieved that morning when they finally went; Abraham insisted on giving them some food and water to take with them. I was hoping that it would be out of sight, out of mind, but I have to say that their shadow still seems to remain with us, somehow it has left a dark place between Abraham and myself. Thank goodness I still have Isaac. The most important thing now is to keep him safe – with me for always.

### **Soap-notes for Hagar/Ishmael**

*(Hagar)* I shouldn't have gone back to them. I returned because the angel told me to, so that my son would be safe, would grow up with his father and in a family. And then look what happened – they tried to kill both of us by forcing us out into the desert. She was always jealous of my son, he was so strong – compared with the weak little boy that she eventually produced herself. She knew that Abraham loved him – after all Ishmael was his first-born – and she could not bear that his father's love might be shared between both his sons. Once Isaac was weaned, once she knew that he would survive and grow up, she was determined to get rid of both of us. She used what happened at the weaning feast as an excuse to get what she had wanted ever since she had known that she was going to bear a child herself.

It was dreadful those first days in the wilderness. I thought we would both die. I couldn't bear to see my son suffer so, that is why I went away – and then, I don't know how – I suddenly saw the spring of water. We drank and were saved. And then traders came and took pity on us, and brought us here to this place where we can live in freedom. We will never go back. I have told my boy what they did to us, and I have told him to remember. Neither of us can forgive. I hope that one day they too will know the pain that comes when you think you are going to lose your only child.

### **Questions for Abraham**

1. Apparently you sent Hagar and her son out into the wilderness because God told you to do so. Were you really sure that it was God who was speaking – or was this a convenient way to resolve a family dispute?
2. When God apparently told you to dismiss Hagar and Ishmael he said, 'Whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her voice' (verse 12). Does that phrase 'listen to her voice' sound at all familiar? Why do you think God used those words?
3. Did you really want Hagar and Ishmael to die?
4. What do you think of the words of the angel of God when he rescued Hagar and Ishmael?
5. Do you think there is any connection between this episode and what happens next in your story, in Genesis 22?
6. Amazingly both your sons survived. How do you expect they will relate to each other in later life? (see Gen 16.12; 25.9)
7. In later centuries who do you think will particularly honour you? Are they right to do so?

### **Questions for Sarah / Isaac**

1. Why were you, Sarah, so jealous of Hagar and Ishmael?

2. What do you, Isaac, feel about your brother?
3. What similarities, Isaac, do you see between your experience (Gen 22) and that of your brother?
4. What differences, Isaac, do you see between your experience (Gen 22) and that of your brother?
5. How do you think that your respective descendants will relate to each other?
6. What is your view of God, and God's relationship to you?
7. In later centuries who do you think will particularly honour you? Are they right to do so?

### **Questions for Hagar / Ishmael**

1. Why was Sarah so afraid of, and angry with you and your son, and how did you feel when Abraham sent you both out into the wilderness?
2. What do you, Ishmael, feel about your brother?
3. What similarities, Ishmael, do you see between your experience and that of your brother (Gen 22)?
4. What differences, Ishmael, do you see between your experience and that of your brother (Gen 22)?
5. How do you think that your respective descendants will relate to each other?
6. What is your view of God, and God's relationship to you?
7. In later centuries who do you think will particularly honour you? Are they right to do so?

### ***Either***

*Invite the groups to come together and share their responses to the questions.*

*Listen to each group in turn.*

*Invite each group to formulate one question that it wishes to ask each of the other groups. Ask the questions – and listen to the response.*

### ***Or***

*Organise a series of 'visits' between the groups as suggested previously in which the responses can be shared and questions can be asked in a less structured way.*

*Whichever method you choose all should eventually come together to de-role and together seek to answer some of the following questions (the facilitator should choose which are most appropriate for the specific context).*

1. Given the way that within the Christian tradition Abraham is often portrayed as an example of special faith, have you found it difficult – or helpful – to engage with a picture of Abraham that suggests he might be less than perfect?

2. Do the conflicted and ambiguous relationships within the family of Abraham in Genesis in any way reflect the sometimes ambiguous relationships between Jews / Christians (spiritual descendants of Isaac) and Muslims (spiritual descendants of Ishmael)?
3. Is it a blessing or a curse to have the 'history of salvation' complicated by Hagar as we have seen over the three stages of the study?
4. How can those who venerate Abraham as the friend of God be friends of one another? Can we find a way to 'share' Abraham as our common father in faith?

### **Brief commentary for facilitators**

If it has not already surfaced, the concluding discussion of this Stage is perhaps the time to draw attention to the place of Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael within Islamic tradition (see Introduction to this study). Alongside that however it is helpful to reflect on the way that the stories of Ishmael and Isaac are told in such a way as to point up parallels between the trials of the two brothers – both of whom suffer almost to death. Close analysis of Genesis 21 and 22 shows that there is a number of key words and expressions held in common in these two chapters.<sup>4</sup> The writer of Genesis seems to want us to see the two brothers as somehow 'belonging' together. Although Jewish and Christian tradition has normally seen Isaac as 'chosen' in a way that Ishmael is not, in fact the story of Genesis is told in such a way that particularity is not allowed totally to displace universality, and a place in the story seems to remain for Ishmael and his mother.

Bearing this in mind, it is interesting to recall that Muslim tradition, by replacing Isaac with Ishmael as an intended sacrifice, has (for whatever reason) reinforced this sense of linkage between the figures of Isaac and Ishmael. What does this mean for the relationship between the Judeo-Christian tradition and Islam? Or perhaps what does it mean in situations, as in Israel / Palestine today, in which Isaac's and Ishmael's spiritual descendants meet together in situations of tension and difficulty? It is worth looking back at this point to Gen 16.12, part of the divine oracle that announced the birth of Ishmael. The last line of the oracle is normally translated 'and he (Ishmael) shall live at odds with all his kin.' However in fact the words here are more ambiguous and may not include a sense of hostility at all: some other translations put it that Ishmael will live 'alongside his brothers'. The destiny of the Holy Land, and of the relationships between the 'Abrahamic' faiths perhaps lies held between these two possibilities.

There is a powerful poem by the Israeli poet Shin Shalom included in the liturgy for the New Year Festival in Reform synagogues in the United Kingdom. It expresses just how much Isaac and Ishmael, and their respective descendants, still need each other. If there is to be a future it will – and must – include them both.

Ishmael, my brother,  
 how long shall we fight each other?  
 My brother from times bygone,  
 my brother, Hagar's son,  
 my brother, the wandering one.

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<sup>4</sup> E.g. 'early in the morning'; 'shoulder'; 'bush'; 'angel of God'.

One angel was sent to us both,  
one angel watched over our growth –  
there in the wilderness, death threatening through thirst,  
I a sacrifice on the altar, Sarah's first.  
Ishmael, my brother, hear my plea:  
It was the angel who tied thee to me ...  
Time is running out, put hatred to sleep.  
Shoulder to shoulder, let's water our sheep.

*Shin Shalom*

**Issues linked to the 'Presence and Engagement' context** that might be raised through the discussion could include: (as well as the issues already raised in Stages One and Two): Is this biblical story important, either positively or negatively, with respect to relations between Christians and Muslims? To what extent are Christianity and Islam 'sibling' faiths?

### **Closing prayer**

Living and Loving God:  
You graciously took Abraham as your friend,  
and charged him to teach his children the ways of justice and righteousness.  
You promised that all the families of the earth would find their blessing in him.  
We rejoice to be called children of Abraham, and disciples of Jesus the Christ his seed.  
We pray for those who, in following of the way of Christ,  
have been drawn to engage with Jews and Muslims,  
Abraham's other sons and daughters.  
Grant them  
wisdom and patience to listen,  
strength to speak the truth with courtesy and love,  
courage to name injustice wherever it appears,  
compassion towards all who suffer persecution for their faith.  
This we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, the one we honour,  
and in whose way of justice and righteousness we seek to walk,  
for the glory of God and his blessing of the nations.  
Amen

## Further reflections (*if wished*)

The voice of an angel

The woman was exhausted. She had been journeying a long time. She had had no choice. The man had forced her out into the wilderness. A little bread and water was all she had been given. She thought that he had wanted her to die – that she and the child had become an embarrassment to him. That was what the rich old woman, her mistress, had said. Now the situation seemed hopeless. The water had nearly run out and the bread was finished. All that seemed left for her was to die – here in the desert halfway to Egypt. But first she would have to watch her son suffer that same fate – such a bitter and impossible pain.

It hadn't been like that the first time. Not the first time that she had been near this place. That was the time she had run away – had chosen to escape the old woman's cruelty. The child hadn't been born then – although she could already feel the life stirring deep within her. And the life seemed to give her power, to make her determined to seek her freedom for the future. She had come to the spring, the fresh water, and she had seen the angel. Seen him and named him too! They always said that you could not see God – and still remain alive. But she had – at least until now. Perhaps it was now that the penalty was being exacted from her. Perhaps that was why she and the child had to die. For the angel had sent her back to the old man and woman. She had had to go – so that her child could have a name and a family. But it had all led to this. If only she could see another angel, and hear, even for a moment, a voice offering even the smallest part of hope.

The woman was exhausted. She had been journeying a long time. She had had no choice. She had had to leave the town where the child had been born. She had had to leave it suddenly – in the middle of night. There had been no time to make preparations for the long journey, no time to offer farewells and thanks to those who had shown them kindness in the past few weeks. They had had to escape as quickly as possible. The soldiers were coming and the word of their brutality had travelled before them. So now she and the child and her man were here in the desert on the road that led to Egypt. What would the future hold for them in a foreign land? Where they did not speak the language, and where they were simply strangers? Would life with her child always be like this – like a bitter and impossible pain that cut her to the heart?

It hadn't been like that the first time. Not the first time she had gone on a journey. The child hadn't been born then – although she could already feel the life stirring deep within her. And she could remember the words of the angel still echoing within her soul – of the promise of a son who would feed the hungry and defeat the powers of wickedness. She had felt truly blessed when she had seen the angel and heard those words. They had sustained her through the days and months when her body grew and the gossips twittered and the rabbis scowled – before the good old man who had accompanied her ever since had offered to marry her, so that her child could have a name and a family. But it had all led to this. She wondered if the old man was now regretting his kindness. If only she could see another angel, and hear, even for a moment, a voice offering even the smallest part of hope!

The woman is exhausted. She has been journeying a long time. She has had no choice ... no choice for herself and her child ...

Is she one of the many women in our world forced to journey many miles in search of food and water, to keep her child alive in a time and place of famine?

Is she one of the many who have suffered abuse as a domestic servant, a semi-slave, the target of her master's desires and her mistress's jealousy?

Is she one of those who have had to flee danger and persecution, the terror of military brutality, or political and ethnic cleansing?

Is she a refugee or even economic migrant, who has wanted more than she is entitled to, longing for a future of hope rather than despair for her child?

Is she a person who has scandalised her society, with her fertility the visible sign of moral laws transgressed, and her child, despised and rejected by her kin, an emblem of her guilt?

Is she a woman who has insisted on seeing and listening to God, even when she has been told that this is the task of men?

Is she? ...

Is she? ...

How can a woman such as this hear the voice of the angel just one more time?

*Biblical refs: Gen 16; 21.8-21; Mt.1.18-21; 2.13-15*

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## Study 2: Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5 The Ten Commandments

Vasantha Rao

### Introduction (Group Facilitator)

[15 minutes]

The Ten Commandments, also called 'declogue', are found both in Exodus (20.1-17) and in Deuteronomy (5.1-21). God gave these commandments to the people of Israel through Moses on Mount Sinai or Horeb.

Deuteronomy locates Moses and the Israelites in the territory of Moab in the area where the Jordan flows into the Dead Sea (Dt 1:5). As his final act at this important time of transferring leadership to Joshua, Moses delivered his farewell addresses to prepare the people for their entrance into Canaan. These addresses were actually a covenant renewal.... In them, Moses emphasized the laws that were especially needed at such a time, and he presented them in a way appropriate to the situation.<sup>1</sup>

We generally tend to wonder why we should study the Ten Commandments at all, when we are living under grace; as it is written, 'The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (Jn 1.17). It would be good for us to note that the Ten Commandments were not forced upon the Israelites. They are only a response to the loving act of grace of God in liberating the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt (Ex 15.13). They form a basis for the covenant relationship of Israel to God, to fellow human beings and to the rest of the creation. Thus, we may say that the exodus is the gospel, and the commandments are only a response to that gospel.

Jesus Christ referred to and interpreted these commandments (Mt 5.21-24, 27-28; 19.16-20). He summarized the Ten Commandments into two – loving God and loving neighbour (Mk 12.28-34; Lk 10.25-28). Jesus did not abolish the Ten Commandments but engaged with them in providing a re-interpretation making them relevant for the day to day life of a Jew. St Paul likewise interprets some of the Ten Commandments (Rom 7.7, 13.8-10), and today they continue to be of importance in our contemporary context. The commandments affirmed the identity of Israelites and shaped their life and witness in the midst of the Canaanite religions. The same commandments will also provide us direction for our identity and community life in the midst of neighbours of other faiths.

### ***Choice of commandments for study***

All the commandments have relevance for a multi-faith context. For this particular study, I have chosen three commandments, i.e., the first, fourth and the tenth. The first commandment is chosen since it relates to our faith in God; the fourth, since it extends to all people, not just Israel; the tenth, since it summarizes Israel's relationship with others, and also challenges Israel's self-centredness. One is free to choose other commandments, if

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Barker, ed., *NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 242.

it is felt that they have a direct bearing for the local 'Presence and Engagement' context, and to follow the process of study as suggested in this model.

### Group study: Part One

[10 minutes]

*Participants form two or three groups and each group selects one commandment. Each group is asked to note important words in the commandment under study and also to compare the commandment in Deuteronomy with that of the Exodus. Note the differences if any and their implications in the space provided.*

#### First Commandment

##### Deuteronomy

(5.6) I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;

(7) you shall have no other gods before me.

##### Exodus

(20.1) Then God spoke all these words:

(2) I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;

(3) you shall have no other gods before me.

#### Fourth Commandment

(5.12) Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you.

(13) Six days you shall labour and do all your work.

(14) But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work – you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.

(15) Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

(20.8) Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.

(9) Six days you shall labour and do all your work.

(10) But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

(11) For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

#### Tenth Commandment

(5.21) Neither shall you covet your neighbour's wife. Neither shall you desire your neighbour's or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey or anything belonging to your neighbour.

(20.17) You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

### Part Two



[20 minutes]

The respective groups are asked to read the explanations and discuss the questions.

#### **First Commandment:**

It is chiefly concerned not with the general idea that there is only one god (monotheism) but rather with the fact that Yahweh is to be the only God for Israel. Strictly speaking, the commandment even takes for granted a polytheistic situation amongst those who are addressed. But it is Yahweh's zeal which insists on his being the only one for those who belong to him.<sup>2</sup>

1. Are you willing to accept that in our multi-faith society people worship other gods? And how do you feel about that?
2. Do you think that the God our Muslim neighbours believe in is the same God in whom Christians believe?

#### **Fourth Commandment:**

The more immediate practical motivation and effect of the Sabbath commandment, however, was socio-ethical ... The liberation from slavery in Egypt and the gift of a land of their own set Israel's world of economic work in a totally new context. They would now work as free people, no longer in the indignity and insecurity of economic bondage. On that basis, they were to avoid oppressing and exploiting the weak and vulnerable in their own society. Hence the Sabbath commandment is specifically for the benefit of the whole working population, animal as well as human (v.14).<sup>3</sup>

1. Should the Sabbath rest be any one day according to one's religion or should that be the same day in general for all?
2. Do you see the Biblical balance of work and rest in your neighbourhood? What are your observations? Could the Christian community be a role model?

#### **Tenth Commandment:**

The tenth commandment in particular ... is an effective summary of the spirit of commandments 6-9. In all those commandments, the normal motivation involved, which would lead to the transgression, would be self-interest. Thus all the last five commandments prohibit a wrong attitude to neighbours; commandments 6-9 prohibit wrong acts toward them and commandment 10 is comprehensive in prohibiting *desire* leading to any such act.<sup>4</sup>

1. Is it our neighbour's right to have, possess and retain their own religion and practice or do we want to steal it away from them?
2. Do we genuinely want the best for our neighbours? What would that be?

#### **Part Three**

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<sup>2</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy* (London: SCM, 1966), 56f.

<sup>3</sup> C. J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1985), 75

<sup>4</sup> P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1976), 163f.

[15 minutes]

*Write a paraphrased version of the commandment assigned to your group, as found in Deuteronomy, with particular reference to your 'Presence and Engagement' context.*

*Then send one or two ambassador(s) from your group to the other group(s) and present them with your paraphrased version of the commandment. Convince them of your paraphrasing and seek their approval.*

*The ambassadors then return to their respective groups and report the discussion.*

#### **Part Four**

[10 minutes]

*With reference to the commandment that you have paraphrased, choose a familiar event or a story from the Bible which relates to it or illustrates it, and make a human tableau or mime depicting a scene which can express the commandment. The tableau will not have any words or any movements*

#### **Part Five**

[20 minutes]

*All the groups return to one place, and each in turn makes its tableau presentation. The other group members are asked to identify the context of the tableaux and spell out how the scenes relate to the understanding of the commandments.*

*All then discuss in plenary the following question:*

What would be your obedience to this commandment in your multi-faith context, and what would be its implication for your relationships with people of other faiths?

*Take a piece of card and write on it what you are going to say and do in the next week or weeks with the people of other faiths in your neighbourhood. Read it aloud to all the members of the Bible study group.*

## Study 3: Deuteronomy 10

### The Law of the Stranger

*Dominic Moghal*

#### **Introduction**

The basic purpose of this Bible study is to raise consciousness about Christian responsibility towards the strangers living in our communities and to gain knowledge, change attitudes and discover skills in order to fulfil this responsibility. Here I will try to read the Biblical texts in the light of my own experience as a stranger living in Pakistan as a Christian and in Britain as a Pakistani, to explore the challenges and opportunities of our Christian vocation which may prove helpful to individuals or groups working in multi-faith and multicultural contexts.

In this Bible study I am using the word 'stranger' instead of 'sojourner', as most of the immigrants in the UK do not see themselves as temporary residents because many of them are born here and are now British citizens. Moreover, in many of our 'Presence and Engagement' contexts the Christians themselves could be strangers, either because of the demographic changes in their neighbourhoods or because they are newly arrived from other countries. In many situations everybody could be a 'stranger' because of regeneration schemes, social mobility or immigration. Although the word 'stranger' looks a bit strange, it does represent the reality of our situation. In this Bible study we should understand this word as the *ger*, the 'other', a person who is different from us in ethnicity, religion or culture.

As we try to discover our Christian responsibilities towards the strangers, we should keep in mind the reminder of Hebrews, that we are all strangers and pilgrims here on earth, and have no continuing city, because we look to the city not made by hands but the heavenly city. (Heb 11.13-15) Thus as the pilgrim people we should try to come out of our comfort zones and find our identity being strangers, as the Israelites did in the Exodus.

#### **Method**

*The method of this Bible study is to pose a number of questions, which raise some broad based problems about our responsibilities as Christians towards strangers living among us. I will focus on three questions:*

- What is God requiring from us?
- Why is he making this demand?
- How can we respond?

*In a small group or groups of 5-10, participants reflect on two Biblical passages: Dt 10.12-20 and Dt 26.5-10. They are given a number of questions which help them to draw out the meaning, relevance and implication of these texts for their respective*

*contexts. After the group discussion, the participants and the Bible study facilitator share their findings and reflections.*

*I have also added at the end a few illustrations, based on my own stories and experiences of how as a stranger I have dealt with these questions. This is only a guideline; Bible study facilitators and participants are encouraged to share their own stories and experiences.*

### **The Text: Dt 10.12-20**

So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it, yet the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. Circumcise, then the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. He is your praise; he is your God who has done for you these great and awesome things that your eyes have seen. Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven.

### **Comment**

This Biblical text appears to be a form of a commandment, an order or a claim made by a mighty God to his beloved people Israel that they should love and serve him alone with all their hearts and souls. They should clean and soften their hearts and should not be stubborn. Moreover, they should love the strangers. He provides them with four rationales why should they obey these commandments:

1. Because he has chosen them alone to be his people.
2. That they should not forget their own slavery in the land of Egypt and be ungrateful.
3. It is for their own well being that they should obey these commandments.
4. Because God loves the stranger.

Thus the message is simple, clear and beneficial. Then what next? I think we can learn more from this text in order to achieve our set goals if we read it along with the following passage, Dt 26.5-10:

A wandering Aramean was my father; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labours upon us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers; the Lord heard our cries and saw our affliction,

our toil and our oppression. Thus the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand of power and the outstretched arm, with terrifying display of power; and with signs of wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first fruit of the ground, that you O Lord have given me.

Let us dig deeper in to these texts by raising the following questions:

### **Questions to the text**

#### **1. Why did the Israelites go to Egypt?**

The book of Genesis gives the following account as to why the Israelites went to Egypt:

They said to Pharaoh, we have come to reside as aliens in the land; for there is no pasture for your servants' flocks because the famine is severe in the land of Canaan. (Gen 47.4)

Here it becomes clear that the Israelites went to Egypt to find livelihood.

#### **2. What do we call these kinds of groups nowadays?**

They are called immigrants, asylum seekers or refugees. This means that the Israelites could be economic immigrants or refugees in Egypt.

#### **3. Why did the Egyptians treat them badly?**

They were frightened that the growing population of the Israelites might overpower them. The book of Exodus explains their fear in the following manner:

Now there was a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to them, 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land'. (Ex 1. 8-11)

So it was fear and loss of power which forced the Egyptians to be nasty to the Israelites.

#### **4. Who saved the Israelites from the hands of the Egyptians? Why and how?**

God saved the Israelites from the hands of Egyptians with his mighty power and wonders. He saved them because he loved them. Ex 1.8-2.10 gives a detailed account of how this process of their freedom took place. In a nutshell, God brought calamities on the Egyptians such as plagues, he killed their firstborn, and he drowned their armies in the Red Sea. He provided the Israelites with food and water in the wilderness, completely protected them and brought them to the Promised Land of milk and honey.

#### **5. Apart from God, who else may have helped in the freedom of the Israelites?**

Many people played a part: Moses and his brother Aaron; an important role was played by the ordinary midwives, who by their wit and wisdom tricked Pharaoh and saved the whole generation of the Israelites males. Had they not saved that generation there would have been nobody left for Moses and Aaron to lead. The mother and sister of Moses also played a crucial role, similar to that of the midwives, using their wisdom and cleverness not only to

save Moses also to make it possible for him to be brought up in Pharaoh's house. Here the Bible is giving us a very important message. Often people whom we think to be least important are the actual heroes. The ordinary women, who in Pharaoh's sight were no great danger, played a major role in the freedom of the Israelites.

## **6. What made Pharaoh believe the midwives?**

It could be his racial superiority and class arrogance. He was fully convinced that ordinary women such as midwives would not dare to lie to him. Moreover his stubbornness and sense of superiority forced him to believe the myth that Egyptian women were more delicate than the Israelite women – which is not true, because we all know that labour pains are the same for every woman.

## **7. What does this story of 'freedom from the Egypt' or Exodus really mean for the Israelites?**

Some scholars believe that this story is the most important story in the whole history of the Israelites. Through this experience they discover their own identity and found who God is for them. Explaining the significance of this story, Christine Amjad Ali writes:

Exodus is the most important event in Jewish history; in fact it is where Israel's history really starts from. The stories in Genesis are a kind of prologue to this founding moment ... Exodus, however is more than just an historical event, it is a founding symbol of a people, Jewish people find their own identity, and their understanding of God, in the story of exodus ... this experience of redemption is used as a yardstick to measure present conduct, it is a sure foundation on which future hopes and aspirations can be built and a potent symbol for mobilizing the people and understanding the action of God in their present reality.<sup>5</sup>

In this explanation it becomes clear that the exodus is not only an important story of the past but has clear implications for the future for Israelites ,or maybe for us.

### **Implications for us today**

#### **1. Do you see any connection between your story and the story of the Israelites?**

I see a very close connection between the story of my ancestors and the story of the Israelites, but first I want to share another story which urged me to discover, repent and appreciate our own story as Pakistani Christians. Some years ago, when I was the director of the Christian Study Centre in Rawalpindi, we had a student exchange programme with Luther Seminary in St Paul Minnesota, USA. One of our students applied for a US visa but was refused in spite of fulfilling all the requirements. I was very upset and phoned the US Embassy to find why the visa was refused. They would not tell me but when I insisted on the reason, the visa officer replied, 'It is up to us to decide who enters our land'. With a real passion I asked him: 'Your land? You mean Red Indians' land!' There was a complete silence for a while and then a big laugh and the visa officer said, 'Dominic, send it in again and I will inquire what went wrong' – and finally the student got the visa.

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<sup>5</sup> Christine Amjad Ali, 'The Faith of Exodus', *al-Mushir* Vol. 34 , Spring 1992 (Rawalpindi: Christian Study Centre), 11-12.

We all have our stories but with the passage of time we do forget them. These Biblical texts are encouraging and reminding us not to forget our stories, and to love the strangers around us. For my story, see Illustration 1.

## **2. What does God want us to learn from this story regarding strangers?**

That he is Lord of lords, he is mighty and awesome. He is not partial and he takes no bribe. He provides justice to the orphans and the widows, and loves the strangers and gives them food and clothing. He commands us to love the strangers, because we were also strangers and he saved us. He has a great compassion for the strangers, and if we do not treat them well he is going to stand with them in the same way he stood with the Israelites and with our ancestors. We should not be ashamed of our story, but rather be proud of it.

### **Applications to our own contexts**

#### **1. Do you have strangers in your area? Who are they and why are they here?**

Of course, there are such 'strangers' all over the UK. According to an official publication, in 2004 there were 1.1 million Indian, 0.7m Pakistani, 0.3m Bangladeshi, 0.2m other Asian, 0.6m Black Caribbean, 0.5m African Black, 0.1m other Black and 0.2m Chinese population.<sup>6</sup> The UK has also a rich diversity of various faiths, among them approximately 2.7% Muslim, 1.0% Hindu, 0.6% Sikh, 0.5% Jewish, 0.3% Buddhist, and 0.3% of other faiths. There are new arrivals from Eastern Europe as well.<sup>7</sup>

These strangers came to Britain for various reasons. After the Second World War, many came to help build the country and took those jobs which natives were not willing to do. Some come to study, and contribute a great deal to the economy. Some run businesses, and provide jobs. There are five categories: work permit holders, asylum seekers, students, *mungayters* (spouses), and missionaries. There are some other interesting categories of 'strangers' – to know more about them, please see my Illustration 2.

#### **2. What kind of programmes or projects are in your area to help them?**

I live in Bradford in West Yorkshire. It is a very multicultural and multi-faith city, and therefore there are many programmes and projects to create better understanding and good relationships among the diverse communities. To know more about these projects and programmes please see Illustration 3.

#### **3. What commitment would you like to make to help the strangers around you?**

There can be many ways to help. The BECAN Project mentioned in Illustration 3 suggests at least four possible ways:

- We can pray for them.
- We can take part in spreading the message and doing advocacy.

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<sup>6</sup> Home Office, *Life in the UK* (London, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> For figures related to particular parishes, see *Presence and Engagement: The Churches' Task in a Multi-Faith Society* (General Synod, 2005).

- We can volunteer.
- We can provide financial support.

No matter what commitments we may make, we need to bear one thing in mind: We should avoid being patronising. In fact we should be grateful to them for providing us with the opportunities to deal with our own hungers and thirsts of meeting Jesus through them. Jean Vanier beautifully makes this point when he quotes Carl Jung:

I admire Christians, because when you see someone who is hungry or thirsty, you see Jesus. When you welcome someone, who is 'stranger', you welcome Jesus. When you clothe someone who is naked, you clothe Jesus. *What* I do not understand, however, is that Christians never seem to recognise Jesus in their own poverty.<sup>8</sup>

So, keeping our own poverty in mind, we should stand with the strangers in order to encounter God through them.

#### **4. Do strangers have any responsibility to enhance relationships between them and the broader community?**

Strangers certainly have a responsibility in building up smooth relationships with the broader community. First of all if they really believe that they are not temporary 'sojourners', but are here to stay, then they must try to learn, understand and respect the culture and values of British society. They should take a step forward to understand the history and other developments which brought Britain to its present stage. The most important thing is to break those myths which they hold about broader community. See Illustration 4 for the story of a taxi driver I met the very first week I came to live in Bradford.

Strangers should also not be ignorant of the rich history and culture of this soil, and not limit British culture and civilisation merely to binge drinking and pornographic movies, as *Jihadis* often do. Here I want to quote one incident which will illustrate my point of view, the burning of Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses*. The people who burnt the book were completely ignorant of the symbolism of this act. They had no clue what this horrific act means in British society where people have suffered, struggled and sacrificed for centuries to gain freedom of expression. In their society, this was an issue of no importance, and burning books is almost a routine activity.

Those brothers and sisters who see themselves as missionaries in this land, here to transform British society also need to reflect more carefully. Last year we had an Asian convention in Bradford, where some of our brothers from the subcontinent were making claims to be 'reversal missionaries'. There is nothing wrong in being a missionary; indeed, every Christian should be a missionary. However, what I do not agree with, is arrogance and an inability to learn from our history, remembering that once upon a time we were also the targets of such missions and found them offensive.

The 'strangers' must remember and understand that the British people also have a long history and rich culture, and have a vast experience of doing mission. In my seven years of living here as a student of society and religion, one thing which I have clearly understood is

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<sup>8</sup> Jean Vanier, *Befriending the Stranger* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005), 64.



that British society is a lot more educated, rich and complex than societies such as ours. When I hear my fellow country men making claims to transform the entire British society, it reminds me of the story of a Pakistani gentleman who learned something in five minutes which one of his school fellows took five years to learn – see Illustration 5. Please, let us learn from our histories and not repeat the same mistakes.

## Conclusion

These Biblical tests are important reminders of God’s love for his people, especially for those who were at times in great difficulty: God took them out of their misery. He did his work. What is our responsibility? We each have to think for ourselves what has God done for us, but one important reminder is that we should be very grateful to him. Gratitude is not the best of the virtues, but ingratitude is the worst of vices. Let us not forget our stories, and remember them in the words of Bishop Dom Helder Camara who said:

With us, without us, and even despite of us, the poor will be freed, because God always stands with them.

## Illustration 1 – The Pakistani Christian story

In Pakistan, many of us who are now part of the *status quo* often try to deny or hide our story. We are under the impression that any affiliation or connection with that past will make us uncomfortable and bring shame on us, so it is better not to repeat it. So we often try to disown and deny that our ancestors were slaves under the Hindu caste system, and God freed them by his mighty hand and wonders through the hard work of those ordinary Western missionaries who were not fit to fulfil the academic requirements of Oxford and Cambridge and were sent to mission in India.

Describing the story of Pakistani Christians, Patras Yusaf, a pioneer Pakistani theologian and the second Punjabi Bishop, writes:

The history of the Punjabi Christian community is a history of humiliation and exploitation, of injustice and slavery. Belonging to the out castes, they were the object of discriminatory behaviour. They were not allowed to drink from the same well or to eat from the same plates as others. They had to wear different dress, and their names would reveal the group they belonged to. Considered of the low position, they were treated as such and many injustices were done to them. They were systematically deprived of whatever would make it possible for them to initiate and develop their own policies. Structures were devised to prevent them from rising out of their low status. Thus they were kept illiterate and any access to education was blocked. They were held in utter financial dependence so that they could never make it on their own. They were not even allowed to hear about God and were controlled by feudal masters who used religion to condition their minds to accept their low status and be resigned to it.<sup>9</sup>

It is very unfortunate that in a Pakistani community, people like me who are now fourth generation Christians have almost forgotten this story. Today God is reminding us again not to forget our story, and to stand with those who are in the same situation as our ancestors.

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<sup>9</sup> Patras Yusaf, ‘Community: The Place Where Theology Is Made’, *Focus* (Multan: Pastoral Institute, 1983), 19-20.

Those of us who are reluctant to accept this story may find encouragement in the following message from St Paul:

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise, by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. (1Cor 1.26-27)

### **Illustration 2 – Four kinds of ‘strangers’**

The first category is the disco stranger. How can one recognise a disco stranger? When you see a person having a bottle of whisky in one hand and his girl friend in the other, who goes to a posh Western restaurant and asks them: ‘Do you serve *halal* meals?’

The second category is the *Jihadi* Stranger. The majority of these are Muslims. They strongly believe that Western people are going to go to hell because their culture, politics, economic and all other system are corrupt. They can only be saved if they join their faith, for example following the *Shariah* (Islamic Law). They believe that all the problems which the Muslim world is facing today are caused by following the Western civilisation and political system. They practice only monologue. My advice is to avoid them as much as possible. Although they are in a minority, yet they are very organised and influential. When I was doing my post graduate research in Bradford in 2001, one of them told me that by 2020 a Caliph will be sitting in 10 Downing Street issuing *fatwas* (religious decrees). Apart from people of their own faith, many times their own parents get fed up with them and throw them out of their homes and mosques.

The third category is what I call *momins* (believers). They are in the majority. Their primary concern is to meet their economic and social needs. Most of them work between twelve and sixteen hours a day, and even on holidays. Their main worry is how to pay various bills and to send some money to their relatives back home. Religion is for them more of an issue of identity rather than of practice. They are very happy and grateful to be in this country, but at times they become nostalgic about their home land.

The fourth category can be named *halal burgers*. As apparent from the name, this group of people are willing to engage and cooperate on the issues of common interest and common good. They see Britain as their homeland and care for it. They are realistic and are fully aware that they and their children have to live here and have to move on from the past. Although they give a great respect to their own culture and religion, they also give respect to other cultures and religions and believe in the policy of ‘live and let live’. They are our partners in social transformation. They want to see a positive role for religion in public life.

### **Illustration 3 – Some projects in Bradford**

Bradford Ecumenical Asylum Concerns (BECAN) was set up to address the needs and concerns of the many asylum seekers in the Bradford district. Their motto is ‘Welcoming the Stranger’ and their commitment is resourced by the following biblical passage:

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, and you invited me in (Mt 25.25)

To learn more about BECAN, contact [judy.beacan@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:judy.beacan@yahoo.co.uk).

Bradford Churches for Dialogue and Diversity (BCDD) is also an ecumenical project which provides learning and training to Christians on how to develop and carry out Christian mission among different faiths and cultures. They can be reached by [www.bcdd.org.uk](http://www.bcdd.org.uk).

Based on the theology of incarnation and the strategy of Presence and Engagement, *Rabta* (Communication) and *Sharakat* (Communion), two Urdu words, are the names of two community based projects run by local churches: St Saviour's, Fairweather Green and St Paul's, Manningham. These initiatives aim to build the capacity of the local congregations to relate to difference and to welcome the strangers around. Information about *Rabta* can be found on [www.stsaviourfeg.org.uk](http://www.stsaviourfeg.org.uk) and *Sharakat* from [Stpaul@legend.co.uk](mailto:Stpaul@legend.co.uk).

#### **Illustration 4 – A Pakistani taxi driver**

When in 2001 we moved to Bradford, the very first week we were brought home by a Pakistani taxi driver. When he saw the area we were living, he got very upset, because it was completely a white area. He told me that we are not safe in this locality and should move immediately to an area where the Pakistani community lives. When I asked him why we should move, he stressed that here we were living among enemies and he will look a house for us. I did not take him seriously but he was very serious, and after a few days he came back to tell us the good news that he had found a cheaper house for us. When I told him we are very happy in this place and it belongs to our friends, it came to him as a great surprise and he still insisted that we should move to a place where people from our own community lives. I asked the taxi driver, how long he had been living in Bradford and if he had any bad experience of dealing with white people. He thought for a while and then replied actually no, but as I have learned from various members of the community, it is my responsibility to warn you. I thought that if I had not lived among white people, but simply came from a village in Pakistan, I would have bought his myth and lived with it for the rest of my life.

#### **Illustration 5 – Learning logic**

A Pakistani gentleman named Aslam won a Fulbright scholarship to study logic for five years in the US. During his time in the states he often felt nostalgic about his early childhood in the village and decided to visit his village he returns. When he was visiting his village he met one of his primary school class mates Rashid who enquired from him where he had been all these years. Aslam told his friend that after he finished his primary school he went to Islamabad and continued his study and when he finished his MA he got scholarship to study logic in the states. Rashid who never went beyond the primary inquisitively asked what is logic so Aslam tried to explain him with an example and asked, do you have a dog? He replied yes. Then Aslam said, if you have a dog this means you have a lot of cattle. Rashid replied yes. When Aslam asked him this means you also have a lot of land. He answered yes. Then Aslam said this means your mother is a very respectable lady and Rashid replied of course she is indeed a very respectable woman in the whole village. So Aslam told Rashid that this is called logic. With one question you tried to reach various conclusions. After they were departed Rashid met another friend, Bashir, and told him about Aslam, his studies in the states and said what he has learned from him about logic. Bashir also inquisitively asked what logic is. Rashid said sit down and I will teach you and he asked do you have a dog? Bashir replied no, so Rashid said that I am very sorry to tell you that according to the logic your mother is a prostitute.

## Study 4: Deuteronomy 12

### Abhorrence of Other Gods

Tim Butlin and Patrick Morrow

#### The Text: Dt 12.29-32

NIV

<sup>29</sup> The LORD your God will cut off before you the nations you are about to invade and dispossess. But when you have driven them out and settled in their land, <sup>30</sup> and after they have been destroyed before you, be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, 'How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same.' <sup>31</sup> You must not worship the LORD your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods. <sup>32</sup> See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it.

NRSV

<sup>29</sup> When the LORD your God has cut off before you the nations whom you are about to enter to dispossess them, when you have dispossessed them and live in their land, <sup>30</sup> take care that you are not snared into imitating them, after they have been destroyed before you: do not inquire concerning their gods, saying, 'How did these nations worship their gods? I also want to do the same.' <sup>31</sup> You must not do the same for the LORD your God, because every abhorrent thing that the LORD hates they have done for their gods. They would even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods. <sup>32</sup> You must diligently observe everything that I command you; do not add to it or take anything from it.

#### Putting the text in context

##### 1. The 'problem'

This passage is surely one of the most challenging for any Christian who has any interest in inter faith relations, let alone a commitment to 'Presence and Engagement'. Let us spell it out: it demands that people of other faiths are absent, and that no engagement with them is possible. If we think in terms of 'exclusivism', 'inclusivism' and 'pluralism', here is surely exclusivism, which we cannot just wish away?

And there is more going on than just the obviously religious. We must also be clear how Deuteronomy focuses on particular territory (almost *ad nauseam* in some early chapters), and assumes it will soon belong to God's people by divine injunction. It is not clear which rationale for this is the stronger: is it because of God's love of the ancestors? Is it because God heard the cry of God's people caused by their oppressive enslavement in Egypt?<sup>1</sup> They are not incompatible of course. But neither is without problems. Do God's elect as God's elect have the right or duty to dispossess? Do oppressed victims as oppressed victims have the right to gain their liberty at the expense of others?

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<sup>1</sup> They come together: see 7.8 (all references in this chapter are to Deuteronomy unless otherwise stated).

We do not need to demonstrate that these are issues with contemporary relevance. We are not thinking only of Israel-Palestine. Much of this kind of language played a huge part in the conflicts in Ireland, for example. And, on a smaller scale perhaps, in 'Presence and Engagement' parishes, we know that it can happen that more than one party sees itself as 'dispossessed' by alien 'dispossessors'.

In fact, more than 'mere' dispossession is envisaged. Rather the command is for *herem*, holy war, 'dooming to destruction', or 'utterly destroying', not only the idols or images and shrines of the people (12.1ff) but the seven peoples themselves (7.2). And execution is the punishment of the idolatrous Israelite, the false prophet (13.1ff; 17.1ff) and even the rebellious son (21.18).

## 2. Tempting 'solutions'

A whole string of 'temptations' may well present themselves. One is to say: 'But that is the god of the Old Testament, the god of war and wrath. Jesus however shows us the God of love'. If you have not had a discussion on why Christians read the Hebrew Bible as Holy Scripture, decide how to do so! One account is offered in our introductory remarks at the start of this collection.

A more 'sophisticated' version of this temptation will be to dismiss the Deuteronomist in particular. Is he<sup>2</sup> not just a bully, who has God calling for sevenfold genocide, and for the eradication of all places of worship apart from the one Place (12.1ff)? He just wants to do away with perceived trouble-makers and have everyone worship as he worships. While it is likely that religious and political concerns are part of the Deuteronomist's agenda (to say the least), this analysis is also simplistic.

## 3. Towards a 'defence'

Before we write off Deuteronomy altogether, we must remember that it is this book which gives us the most majestic words in the Old Testament, namely the *shema* ('Hear O Israel') with its call to love God with all your heart with all your soul and with all your strength (6.4ff). This is central to Judaism: these should be the last words you say! And our Lord calls this the greatest commandment (Mt 22.37). Also, Deuteronomy is about good news. The people are finally about to enter the promised land. There is a breathlessness to the early chapters, with the repetition of: 'When you go into the land which you are about to go into ...' It is exciting.

It is exciting because it is about God's special, miraculous interventions in the world (4.34), in God's calling of the ancestors (4.37), the Exodus from Egypt and the giving of Torah (5.1ff), God's intimacy with Moses, the hero-prophet without equal (34.10). God is the agent, and the people are undeserving recipients. It is fair to say this is a gospel of pure *grace* (7.7; 9.4f).

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<sup>2</sup> We feel we have to stick to gender-exclusive language here. According the text, and / or Jewish tradition, the Deuteronomist is (usually) Moses. According to scholarship, we have no reason to think any biblical writer was a woman. Discussion on this itself is surely pertinent to our theme.

The verse before our passage is truer to the heart of Deuteronomy: ‘Be careful to obey all these words that I command you today, so that it may go well with you and with your children after you forever, because you will be doing what is good and right in the sight of the LORD your God.’ And God is close to you: ‘Surely this commandment that I am commanding you this day is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven... the word is very near to you ... (30. 11ff.)’.

Even if this account is too selectively rosy, you may well find *tackling* the *harder* issues worthwhile (perhaps especially if you engage with some religions which use images in worship, and some which do not). Worthwhile, we say, not easy. You will not find in Deuteronomy any spelled-out rationale for the condemnation of other gods, or why even the possible memory of them is a threat. The author does not debate whether they ‘really exist’ as spiritual beings or whether idolatry is wrong because it is worship of something humanly manufactured, is self-worship, or worship of wealth and comfort (contrast, say, Is 44.9ff). He does not spell out why an image of YHWH is so unthinkable (chapters 4-5). Since he does insist that God can speak, can command and call (and indeed has a strong arm to deliver), it is not that he is a philosophical sophisticate who is against all anthropomorphism. So, working out ‘what is going on’ in Deuteronomy is not going to be easy. But, if we attempt it seriously, we may find that there are treasures hidden ‘even’ in Deuteronomy, even in this passage.

#### **4. A disclaimer**

It is worth noting that we have throughout worked with a so-called ‘biblical theological’ model which treats the text as we have it now (however it was put together over years, decades, centuries) as the substantive *datum*, and the proper focus. Nevertheless (so as not to make it too easy for ourselves) we have taken the text in question to be Deuteronomy, not the whole of Torah, or the Hebrew Scriptures. Both Jews and Christians have (different) traditions of balancing one text from one part of the Bible with something from somewhere quite different. That is of course a perfectly respectable task. Indeed, if we were really to take on the daunting task of putting this passage in all its contexts, it would have to be done. But there is also merit in trying to work out what is really the heart of things for Deuteronomy alone.

#### **The exercise**

Because this passage is so ‘tendentious’, and because it does not really have any narrative development, and there are no obvious characters who go through some crisis or creative transformation, we do not suggest only a role play, as in some of the other studies presented here. Rather, we invite you to consider three options.

1. If you find temperatures rising just on hearing or reading the passage – and perhaps if your group is full of equally extrovert and eloquent people – you may need to break up into groups of the size you know works best, and just hit the question on the head: ‘What is going on here?’ Remember to be clear whether you are or are not also discussing the question: ‘Do we really treat the Old Testament as Christian Scripture?’

2. Option 1 may make the group form a 'common mind' too quickly. A variation would be to engage in a rough version of an Ignatian exercise in 'testing the spirits'. Here, everybody either 'goes off' alone or (probably better) has a partner to talk with (a very rabbinical way of learning – 'Find a friend', the rabbis said – meaning a study partner). Their first task is to work out all the things in the text they might want to criticise. This is not their final judgement. They are to have free rein to think, imagine, make up all the things which might *possibly* be wrong with the text. Then the larger group gathers, and everyone reports back. *There is no debate at this point.* Nobody says that what someone has criticised they see as a good point. It is all just negative at this point. And then you notice what is going on. Not only: did everyone have a little or a lot to say? But also: how does it feel now that we have been as critical as possible? Do I feel enlightened, enlivened, heartened, more in tune with God even? Then you go away, and do the opposite, namely think, imagine, make up all the things which might *possibly* be right with the text, report back *without debate*, and again just notice what is going on. After all this, of course, real debate may follow. (But all the group will need to agree on the timing of such a major transition.)

3. For those drawn to a more traditional kind of role playing, there is a third option. Of course, there *are* characters in this passage, even if they are not obvious. We suggest three:

- a) The Deuteronomist (or you can think of Moses if you prefer);
- b) The existing people in the land, who do worship other gods;
- c) The people of Israel who have disobeyed Moses, and have been ensnared by other gods.

Imagine that, somehow, these three have managed to come together around a common, round, equitable table, where each can speak their mind. Be clear whether you are going to imagine you are the historical characters, or contemporary equivalents. Both are valid approaches, but you must agree which you are following.

a) Who is the author of Deuteronomy, or Moses? Remember his excitement and urgency. God has met with God's people in Exodus and Sinai/Horeb, and they are about to find their own land, flowing with milk and honey. You want nothing to distract people from worship of the one God, the God who liberates and guides. Distractions are not just nuisances, they are life-threatening. What are the distractions? How do you convey that urgency in a way that actually hits home?

b) Who are the seven peoples in the land? Remember the invaders have passed judgement on the whole of your religious life, without doing anything to find out about it. They say you cannot worship through images, but they worship through hearing or remembering God's speech. What is so guilty about the eye, and so innocent about the ear? Indeed they are forbidden even from simply informing themselves. How does it feel to be so pre-judged, to face apparently divinely inspired prejudice?

c) Who are the people of faith who have become spiritually 'ensnared'? Or who are on the point of becoming ensnared? Remember the ensnaring is so powerful that you come to think you have to sacrifice your own kin to this 'other god'. What kind of things are so debasing? How did the 'ensnaring' come about? What warnings can you give to others?

## Reflections to aid further discussion

### 1. On the one hand ...

We must give ourselves permission to decide that this text may have nothing to say about 'Presence and Engagement', and is a part of the Bible which is redundant at best. If the plain meaning of the text is true, and God is as genocidal and committed to execution as Deuteronomy says, then, frankly Christianity (or Christian hope and love) must be untrue. Again, if Deuteronomy is really committed to blanket absence and non-engagement, then we must refuse to follow Deuteronomy. It is worth saying that *if* you have to choose between God and the truth, the godly thing to do is choose truth. Deuteronomy's call to wilful ignorance at all costs cannot be right.

This is in effect what the rabbis did with the more violent texts. They said the call to *herem* (or 'holy war' or 'total destruction' or 'dooming to death') only applied at this one time in this one location. Since it is now quite impossible to identify any of the seven peoples, there is no possible context in which this command could apply. In rabbinical Judaism, the very term *herem* comes to mean 'excommunication', banishment of a Jew from the Jewish community.<sup>3</sup>

And again, if we come to think that for Deuteronomy there really are other Gods who rival Israel's God, who are in the same category as YHWH, then we need to think harder about our Christian commitment to monotheism. Monotheism is probably not the best word. It may immediately raise the idea of an abstract philosophical discussion about 'how many instances of the category "Deity" do there happen to be?' Answer: 'It so happens, one'. But actually the great 'monotheistic' faiths do not start there. It is more a statement of God's absolute uniqueness. God is uniquely unique (cf. 4.35). There can be only one God, and to speak of more than one God is just to speak meaninglessly (a bit like, taken literally, 'for ever and a day' though that works as a colloquialism of course).

### 2. On the other hand ...

An opposing view is that this passage is actually *no* threat at all to 'Presence and Engagement', and that it is even pertinent to Christian discipleship. The case for this is involved. It is about what can be inferred, rather than what is there on a first reading. It has all the qualities of a cumulative argument. But that is sometimes the best way to argue.

Let us try it. On a close reading, there is in fact a 'discussion' going on within Deuteronomy: the call to kill the people off completely is followed by the call not to make covenants with them or to intermarry (7.2ff). Is this not meaningless, unless the call to genocide is not meant literally, but metaphorically? It comes to mean: have nothing to do with the people; treat them as if dead. We have already noted that this position is still not acceptable within a Christian frame, let alone in the spirit of 'Presence and Engagement'. But there is more. If you treat the seven peoples of the land as irrelevant, as if dead, naturally you can know nothing of how they do in fact worship their gods, not even their gods' names. You have to

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<sup>3</sup> And forms of Judaism, like forms of Christianity, will take the whole story of the history of the people of God as a spiritual or mystical drama.



imagine everything.<sup>4</sup> Our passage actually makes this clear: 'Be careful not to be ensnared by *enquiring...*'. The dangerous thing to do is actually for an Israelite to imagine or invent how the as-it-were-'previous' peoples might have worshipped.<sup>5</sup>

So it is a possible interpretation to say that 'the other gods' are really the projection of what happens to the people of faith, if they set out deliberately to rebel, to debase their religion. It is about absence and non-engagement, yes. But it is against an engagement with 'the dark side' of your religion, or of your projection of that. Surely, we share the Deuteronomist's judgment that that 'dark side', that 'projection' of 'wrong religion', that form of life which 'ensnares', is to be avoided. Whether or not this is the best summary of Deuteronomy, as a *warning* on its own terms, it is surely a vital component within 'Presence and Engagement': we must never allow ourselves to be naïve and see 'religion', 'faith', 'spirituality', or even 'engagement and encounter' as necessarily powers which build up rather than harm the human community. That would be false in a way that needs no demonstrating.

The point can be strengthened. For Deuteronomy, YHWH *can* in some senses be localised: YHWH can speak out of fire (4.12), can choose a place for his Name to dwell (12.5), can be seen via sight of the consequences of his actions (4.3). Yet any fixed image, any 'form' is unthinkable. Why? Might it not be just that, a form, a representative shape is fixed? In contrast, fire moves, commandments are enacted, liberation is experienced. Is the Deuteronomist setting out a polarity? With YHWH (who can never be static, even symbolically) there comes a way of life abounding in life, liberation, growth, speech, commandments (tasks), and blessing. So the Living God makes for life. With the other gods (who are represented in static form) is an abounding in lifelessness, irrelevance to everyday life, stasis, silence, and curse (cf. 11.26ff). The lifeless gods make for death, and, at the logical end of that, killing. So, we might say that 'other gods' stand for all that is deadly and deadening in religion and in life. We must not let Cranmer's abridgement of the first of the Ten Commandments mislead us. 'I am YHWH your God, *who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods ...*' (5.6). Once liberated, to choose to be other than liberated is by definition to choose to be ensnared.<sup>6</sup>

There are dangers in assuming that what ensnares need be another religion. Actually, to speak of 'other religions' and 'other faiths' is not to use biblical language. So the ensnaring might be from a form of life which is not overtly 'religious'. Think of Archbishop Huddleston's prophetic stance against apartheid. He knew that his church made pronouncements against the racist state. But he came to see, that, because of all kinds of 'pragmatic' reasons, it was in fact colluding. There were black schools and white schools (and the black schools were quite expressly to teach differently). There were even white congregations and black congregations. Huddleston had the revelation of seeing (literally)

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<sup>4</sup> This is clearer in the NRSV's 'How did these nations serve their gods' than the NIV's present tense. The Hebrew (imperfect) does not settle the matter.

<sup>5</sup> Notice that this makes it hard to call Deuteronomy an 'exclusivist', if by that is meant that outside your own group there is no salvation. Eternal salvation is not the theme. But neither is the broader question about how gentiles could worship aright. It is not discussed, though 4.19 is intriguing: 'And when you look to the heavens and see the sun, the moon and the stars ... do not be led astray and bow down to them, things that the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere.'

<sup>6</sup> This emphasis is indebted to Kochan, Lionel, 1997, *Beyond the Graven Image: A Jewish View*, Macmillan, Basingstoke.

how violent the state – a police state – really was. It had to be resisted, not criticised. Mere criticism was collusion.<sup>7</sup> Is this not an example of someone realising godly religion had become ensnared. Or again, we write this while devastating floods in Burma are being reported – while the military rulers deliberately shun help. Have they not been ensnared by a deathly form of life, exclusivist militarist nationalism?

#### 4. The Elephant in the Room?

Or not. This may sound much too close a reading. A simpler one is certainly possible. The ‘other gods’ do not ‘stand for’ anything. They are other existences or beings or realities or spirits. We might call them ‘demons’ or perhaps ‘fallen angels’ or just perhaps ‘demi-gods’. The danger is thus that if you seek them out, they will come running to meet you, and they have real-life power. That is the beginning and end of Deuteronomy’s warning. This has all the advantages of a simple explanation, and all of the disadvantages.

It must be said that, in the global Christian community, and in many ‘Presence and Engagement’ contexts, some (perhaps many) will readily resonate with this interpretation. If we are brutally honest, which of us has not, on the very first encounter with the house of worship of another faith, felt so estranged (been troubled by how everything is the-same-but-different) that we think something like: ‘There is another spirit here’? We can own these feelings. But they are not necessarily decisive. It could be saying more about our ‘comfort zone’ than external realities. Someone from one Christian denomination entering another might feel *precisely* that. Yet Christian ecumenism has helped us recognise that we have a common core.<sup>8</sup>

The issues of the nature and extent of demons or unclean spirits is one we cannot answer here. Deuteronomy will not provide the answer. His question is not, ‘What *are* the other gods?’, but, ‘How can we stop Israel being caught up with their phenomena, whatever-they-are’. Saying ‘the other gods’ are ‘spiritual entities’ like or namely ‘demons’ does not actually settle anything. If they are spiritual entities, then they are of an utterly different order from the One God, and so in no sense rivals, except pseudo-rivals (again, 4.35). If they are better thought of as human spirituality-as-distorted, that in no sense makes them less of a threat: they still ensnare.

What of the arguably less charged suggestion that there may be ‘a god’ or ‘a spirit’ behind each of the religions? In the first place, note how some of our language works with this (polytheistic?) assumption. How often will a critic say: ‘I cannot be in dialogue with religion x because they worship another god’. Or how often does the enthusiast say: ‘Well, I believe in Christ, but I am sure that Muhammad or Krishna or whoever is the equivalent for you’, as if there were a set of spiritual entities as mediators of the One Super-God (or composite god)? Is this approach really helpful? How are we to discern ‘another spirit’? Do Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims have one in common, or one each? What of Mormonism, Christian Science, Jehovah’s Ws? Did the spirit of the Vedas die, to be replaced by the spirit of the Bhagavad-Gita? We have surely created more problems than we have solved, as religious life is so

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<sup>7</sup> Huddleston, Trevor, 1956, *Naught for your Comfort*, Collins

<sup>8</sup> This is not to claim to know that the world faiths have a common core, just that moods and intimations are not good judges.

much more involved than a simple set of discrete 'species' of religion, making up one 'genus'.

Even if these problems were surmountable, Deuteronomy would not be a ready friend to this argument. Remember: the other gods never do anything, never show anything, never command anything. And, whatever they are, they are always bound up with idols. The idea of 'another god' behind 'another world faith' which itself shunned image-worship is outside of Deuteronomy's logic.<sup>9</sup>

## 5. Other Possible Remarks

We have struggled with offering any interpretation of this passage, not just because, as two Christians, we happen not always to agree, but because one does have to make certain leaps, read between the lines, to turn this arresting text into a sustained and sustainable argument. But we have found the text more and more arresting. Deuteronomy preaches a gospel of fulfilled life in the land of promise, where there is not only milk and honey, but an abounding excitement about the things of God and the story of God (cf. Ps 119). And it comes with the promise of God's meeting *with you*: 'It was not with our parents that YHWH made this covenant, but with us, the living, everyone of us who is here today' (5.3). In terms of the narrative, this is not actually true. But it is Deuteronomy's conviction that all the people of God are always at Sinai. We might compare Luke's famous insistence on 'today'.

At the very least Deuteronomy is a helpful counterblast to any bourgeois view of religion as being nice and unassuming. Compare that later scion of bourgeois religion, Kierkegaard, who said that purity of heart means to will one thing. The imperative: 'Will one thing!' (the continuation of this miraculous story with God) is a good summary of Deuteronomy. Take heed! 'Do not forget! Remember! Teach! Do! This is the context in which the condemnations tend to come. We do not have to 'teach' and 'do' exactly as Deuteronomy did. The same thing in a different place is a different thing. Any way, Deuteronomy is itself presented as a reformation of earlier Torah material. But this is not a bad emphasis to have, when opening the Bible.

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<sup>9</sup> This does not mean that a well-meaning Hindu, who invited you to come and look at her idols *would* fall under Deuteronomy's ban. But there would be a different 'testing of the spirits'.

## Study 5: The Book of Ruth

### Living by *Hesed*

*Ida Glaser and Rachel Weir*

#### Introduction

Ruth is a wonderful story, a tale of ordinary people living in extraordinary times. The story takes place in a cross cultural setting and provides great riches for parishes in a 'Presence and Engagement' context.

The way the main characters respond to what life throws at them shows courage, compassion and loyalty. It is the life of *hesed*, 'compassionate loyalty', and it offers an ideal to which ordinary people can aspire. We must also recognise, however, that the story is told from a very traditional outlook on the world. Readers may find themselves wanting to question some of the assumptions that lie behind the text as they explore the book further.

#### Method

Ruth is a short book with a simple story and a very high proportion of dialogue (57 out of 87 verses). This makes it well suited to the method developed by John Davies,<sup>1</sup> which helps people get inside the text by exploring more deeply how characters in the story think and feel. It is a method that is accessible to all and well suited to a parish context.

Three stages follow using the same method. Stage One focuses on Chapter 1, Stage Two on Chapter 2, Stage Three on Chapters 3 and 4. Each study should last about an hour; timings are given below as rough indicators, allowing 10 minutes or so for moving between groups.

#### The reading

*[5 minutes]*

*The passage is read with people taking the parts of the characters.*

#### Group work

*[15minutes]*

*The group is split at random into smaller groups, ideally of 3 or 4 people. If it is a large study session then parallel groups can run. Each group represents an important character in the story. People try to get inside the skin of that character by considering a list of questions*

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<sup>1</sup> See John Davies, *Only Say the Word* (Norwich: Canterbury, 2002)

*about the story. It helps if people are given name labels to help them take on the role. There is also a group for the Storyteller (the author of the book).*

### **Visiting**

*[5 minutes]*

*One or two from each group are sent to another group to answer a question they have for them. They then report back to their groups. The Storyteller group observes the others interacting.*

### **Plenary**

*[5 minutes]*

*The group comes back together and the storyteller (i.e. the author of the book of Ruth) answers a question posed by the group.*

### **Making connections**

*[20 minutes]*

*Participants come out of role to think about what the passage has to say to them in their contexts today and how they can act to bring about change.*

## **General Background to the Book of Ruth**

### ***The time of the Judges***

The Book of Ruth is sometimes thought of as an idyllic tale, but its setting is anything but. The story takes place in the time of the Judges, when Israel was torn by internal and external strife. The Canaanite religions are an important part of the story's context. Their focus was on fertility and weather and Israel repeatedly turned to them during the times of the Judges. Jg 2.11-23 summarises the cycle of events that is repeated throughout the book: Baal worship – foreign occupation – crying to God – God's compassion and sending of a judge to free them. It was a time when the Israelites were trying to settle into a farming life, after their history of nomadic herding, slavery and building, and wilderness wandering. They often felt that they needed the help of the gods of the land and the weather in order to ensure good harvests. The focus on fertility both of the land and of human beings forms an important background theme in the Book of Ruth.

### ***Moab***

The Moabite setting and characters are also important to understanding the text. Moabites were to be excluded from Israel 'to the tenth generation' after their refusal of hospitality during the wilderness wanderings (Dt 23.3-6). One of their gods was Chemosh, who required human sacrifice (Num 21.29, 2 Kings 3.26-27). They feature in some of the most memorable and most gruesome Old Testament stories.

Moabite origins are traced to the incestuous union of Lot with his daughter (Gen 19.37). It was the Moabite king Balak who instructed his prophet Balaam to curse Israel (Num 22-24): the famous story of Balaam and the ass shows how Israel's God was well able to speak to and through the Moabite prophet, and to bless Israel even though foreigners wanted to curse them. Immediately following the story of Balaam comes the account of Israel's worship of the Moabite Baal (Num 25). Their downfall was the result of sexual relations with Moabite women, although Midianite women were also involved. The resulting plague that afflicted the Israelites was only stopped when the offending men (and at least one of the foreign women, famously speared along with her partner) were put to death. The Moabites occupied Israel for 18 years under their king, Eglon, who was assassinated by the left-handed Ehud (Judges 3.12-30).

It is not surprising, then, that the traditional Jewish commentary (*midrash*) on Ruth starts with a long discussion of why there was a famine, and what sort of person would have left Israel to go to Moab. They conclude that Israel had sinned, and that Elimelech left Israel because he did not trust God.

The study leader needs to know something of this background, in order to help people to understand some of the tensions involved in an Israelite family choosing to live in Moab and marrying Moabite women, in a Moabite woman being accepted as the wife of a leading Israelite, and in the descendant of a Moabite becoming the king 'after God's own heart'.

## **Ḥesed**

It is interesting that in this book God is only mentioned as acting directly twice – once at the beginning (1.6), where the Lord intervenes to give food to the 'his people', and once at the end (4.13), when the Lord intervenes to make Ruth conceive. In the middle there is the highest proportion of dialogue of any OT book (57 verses out of 87), and the story continues through the actions of the humans. This gives the work the feeling that although God gives the frame to the story, it is the human agents who carry it through to its conclusions by their own actions. In particular, their ability to act with *ḥesed* is rewarded by tangible blessings.

*Ḥesed* could be roughly translated as 'loyalty, reliability, kindness, compassion', sometimes shortened to 'compassionate loyalty' or 'loving kindness'. Israel associated *ḥesed* with the Lord's covenant relationship with her, in that despite her many failings God always stood by her in compassionate covenant loyalty. *Ḥesed* was also seen as the ideal approach to human relationships as laid down in Torah, God's law. In the Book of Ruth, *ḥesed* is seen to be practised across cultural and religious boundaries.

The book of Ruth explores what *ḥesed* really means in human lives. There are many examples of *ḥesed* in the book, and they are ultimately rewarded by God's blessing. Ruth leaves her homeland to stay with Naomi: *ḥesed* requires *self-denial* in love of the other. Ruth takes risks in going to glean in the fields and in searching out Boaz on the threshing floor: *ḥesed* also requires *courage and initiative*. Boaz is meticulous in ensuring the letter of the law is observed as kinsman redeemer: *ḥesed* is upheld by the rule of God's law. Ruth is blessed three times for her *ḥesed* (1.8; 2.11; 3.10) and the Lord responds by blessing her family with the conception of Obed in 4.13. The characters in the story understand that acting with *ḥesed* will ultimately meet with God's favour and reward.

Readers will see that the theme of *hesed*, its framework in Torah, and its reward by God are threads weaving throughout the narrative.

### **Introducing the characters, and understanding the names**

In the book of Ruth most of the characters have names which mean something:

*Naomi* – ‘pleasant’ or ‘lovely’ – perhaps a surprising choice of name?

*Elimelech* – ‘my God is king’ – Naomi’s husband, who leaves Bethlehem for Moab!

*Mahlon* and *Chilion* – ‘sick’ and ‘failing’ – ill fated sons of Naomi and Elimelech.

*Ruth* and *Orpah* – ‘friend’ and ‘neck’ (because she turned from Naomi) – Moabite women who marry Mahlon and Chilion.

*Boaz* – ‘strong’ – kinsman of Naomi.

Finally, an important place name is *Bethlehem* – ‘house of bread’ – where most of the story happens

### **Further reading**

The following commentaries may be useful for those who want to dig deeper:

Hubbard, R. L., *The book of Ruth* (NIC), Eerdmans, Michigan, 1995

Nielsen, K., *Ruth* (OT Library), Westminster John Knox Press, Kentucky, 1997

Larkin, K. J. A., *Ruth and Esther* (OT Guides), Sheffield Academic Press, 1996

Other bible studies and more information about the study method can be found in *Only Say the Word* by John Davies, Canterbury Press, Norwich 2002

### **Note to the leader**

*The story of Ruth tells of some very powerful experiences which may resonate unexpectedly with experiences of people in the study group. It may be that some people are affected by strong emotions during these study sessions. Care should be taken to have appropriate pastoral support to hand in case someone feels overwhelmed and needs to withdraw from the group for a time. Whatever arrangements are in place should be publicised at the beginning of each session.*

## Stage One – Ruth Chapter 1

**The story** – This first chapter sets out the background for the rest of the plot. The main characters, Naomi and Ruth, are introduced and we are told how Naomi first came to Moab from Bethlehem with her husband Elimelech and two sons Mahlon and Chilion ...

**Themes to explore** - Living as a migrant; cross cultural marriage

### Notes to understand the text

*Moab* – Moab was an ancient enemy of the Israelite people - see above. Moving there was a drastic step - and so was the marriage to Moabite women.

### Reading the text

[5 minutes]

*It should be easy to read the story direct from the Bible. Chapter 1 needs the following readers: Naomi, Ruth, Orpah, Narrator.*

### Group work

[15 minutes]

*Now split into equal sized groups – each group is going to get under the skin of one of the characters in the story by thinking about the following questions:*

#### Questions for Naomi

How did it feel to have to leave behind the homeland, Bethlehem, ‘house of bread’, to find bread? What did you say to your kinspeople? How did they react? Did anyone feel you had let your people down?

What was it like to be a foreigner and try to live by God’s law in a strange land?

How did you feel when your two beloved sons married people of a different religion? Was there any choice? Did they fit easily into your ways of doing things or did they want to stick to their own customs? Were you hoping for grandchildren to put things right? Why did they not come?

Why did you decide to go home when Mahlon and Chilion had died? How did you feel about having Ruth and Orpah to look after?

How did you feel when Orpah turned back? What about Ruth – did you expect her to stay with you? Has your view of Moabite women changed through knowing Ruth and Orpah? Have you seen *hesed* (loving kindness) in these foreign women?

Now as you enter back into Bethlehem after so long, do you feel shame or joy?

Why do you feel so empty when all around you it is harvest time in your homeland? Where is God in all this?

#### Questions for Ruth



After your marriage to Mahlon you moved into the family home with Naomi. What did you think of your new family? What was it like to be separated from your family and friends by a different way of life and a different religion? How did your kinspeople react to you after your marriage?

What were your expectations? What were Naomi's? Did you have to conform? How did you two get along? What was Orpah's attitude? Did you want to have children? How did it feel to be childless after so many years?

Did you want to go with Naomi after Mahlon died? Were you afraid of whether Naomi's people would accept you with all that has happened between the two places?

Have you seen something special in the culture you married into? Have you seen *hesed* (loving kindness) in this foreign woman?

Why did you leave everything you knew to go after your mother-in-law into the unknown?

### **Questions for Orpah**

After your marriage to Chilion you moved into the family home with Naomi. What did you think of your new family? What was it like to be separated from your family and friends by a different way of life and a different religion? How did your kinspeople react to you after your marriage?

What were your expectations? What were Naomi's? Did you have to conform? How did you two get along? What was Ruth's attitude? Did you want to have children? How did it feel to be childless after so many years?

Did you want to go with Naomi after Chilion died? Were you afraid of whether Naomi's people would accept you with all that has happened between the two places?

Have you seen something special in the culture you married into? Have you seen *hesed* (loving kindness) in this foreign woman?

Why did you decide to return to Moab rather than staying with your new family?

How will you be received back by your own community?

### **Questions for the Storyteller (the book's author)**

Why did you set this in Moab and Bethlehem – enemy lands?

Did Ruth and Orpah have to live by the customs of the Israelites or did they keep their own customs? Why are they childless?

Why do not the women just stay where they are in Moab when all the men die?

Why does Ruth stay and Orpah go? Who shows *hesed* (loving kindness) in this story?

What is the point of the names you chose for the characters?

What is the point of this part of your story?

## Visiting

[5minutes]

*One or two of each team volunteer to visit the others with a question. The storyteller group splits up to overhear the others.*

*Naomi goes to Ruth – Naomi asks, ‘Why did you come?’*

*Ruth goes to Orpah – Ruth asks, ‘Why did you stay?’*

*Orpah goes to Naomi – Orpah asks, ‘Why did you go?’*

*Now return to your group and report back.*

## Plenary

[5 minutes]

*Everyone comes back together to ask the narrator, ‘Why do you tell this story?’*

*Now come out of role for the final part of the study.*

## Making connections – what does the passage say to us today?

[20 minutes]

Do you know people married to people of another faith? How have they coped with the conflicts of identity involved? Do they need support from their churches? What support could we give?

Are there people in our parish who have had to live as migrants? Does this story help us understand their situation? What can we do as a community to build bridges with migrants both Christians and those of other faiths? Have we got some ideas we want to take forward?

## Closing Prayers

## Stage Two – Ruth Chapter 2

**The story** – After returning to Bethlehem at harvest time with her widowed mother-in-law Naomi, Ruth sets out to seek their fortune gleaning barley in the fields. Boaz, a rich kinsman, notices her and is told of her loyalty to Naomi and of her hard work ...

**Themes to explore** – *hesed*; the importance of kinship obligations.

### Notes to understand the text

*Hesed* – means loyalty or loving kindness and is an important virtue to the Israelites, and a key theme in the story (see Introduction).

*Kinship obligations* – Kinship is very important to the relationships in this story. Boaz is from the same clan as Elimelech. A clan is a group of families descended from a common ancestor. The clan was the most important family grouping in Israelite society. Clans owned specific lands for all time which the ‘kinsman redeemer’ or *go’el* had a duty to protect.

*Gleaning* – Ruth intends picking up the ears of grain accidentally dropped by the reapers. The right to glean was guaranteed by Jewish Law. Lev 19.9, 23.22 required Israelite landowners to leave an edge around their fields unharvested to provide food for the poor and resident aliens. Dt 24.19-22 extended the provisions of Leviticus by permitting gleaning in fields and forbidding workers from returning to the field to harvest overlooked sheaves. Gleaning was hard work and gave only a subsistence living.

### Reading the text

[5 minutes]

*It should be easy to read the story direct from the Bible. Chapter 2 needs the following readers: Narrator, Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, Boaz’s servant.*

### Group work

[15 minutes]

*Now split into four equal sized group: Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, Narrator. Each group is going to get under the skin of one of the characters in the story by thinking about the following questions:*

### Questions for Ruth

Why do you decide to go gleaning? Why not let Naomi sort it out? After all, she brought you here; surely she has contacts? Why do you put yourself at the mercy of strangers?

How were you planning to find favour? How much power did you have in the fields? What did it feel like to be a foreigner – especially a Moabite woman? Were you afraid?

Where did your power lie? How did you choose to use what power you had?

How did you feel about Boaz’ kindness? Did you expect it as a Moabite? Why did he do it? Are you worried that he may want something back from you? Will he continue to be a protector for you?

What does *hesed* mean to you?

### Questions for Naomi

Why does Ruth decide to go gleaning? Are you worried for her safety? Or that she might bring disgrace on you? Why did you not tell her to look out for Boaz?

Who are you now in your society? What power do you have? How are you going to make ends meet? Do you have a future? And what can Ruth do for you?

What does *hesed* mean to you?

### Questions for Boaz

What did you think when you first heard about Ruth coming back with Naomi – a foreigner and a Moabite? What do you think when you see her now? What has impressed you?

Your name means ‘strength’; what power is at your disposal? How do you use that power?

Why do you decide to protect Ruth? Do you want something more from her in return? Are your other workers jealous?

What does *hesed* mean to you?

### Questions for the Storyteller (the book’s author)

What are Ruth’s characteristics in this story? How much power does she have? What sort of power is it? How does she use it?

What are Boaz’s characteristics in the story? Why did you call him Boaz (‘strength’)? How does he compare to the men in Chapter 1? How much power does he have and how does he use it?

Are there examples of *hesed* in this story? Which characters show it in particular and why?

Why did you set this scene at harvest time?

What is the main point of your story here?

### Visiting

[5 minutes]

*One or two of each team volunteer to visit the others with a question: ‘Who has shown hesed in this story?’ Boaz asks Naomi; Naomi asks Ruth; Ruth asks Boaz.*

*The storyteller group splits up to overhear the others. Then return to groups and report back.*

### Plenary

[5 minutes]

*Everyone comes back together to ask the narrator: ‘How do the characters show hesed in this story, and why?’*

*Now come out of role for the final part of the study*

**Making connections – what does the passage say to us today?**

*[20 minutes]*

Ruth's situation gave her very little power. What does powerlessness feel like? Can a whole community feel powerless? How can we tackle the feelings that powerlessness brings?

*Hesed* across cultural boundaries is a key theme in this story. Are there examples in your group that people would like to share of people experiencing the sort of life-saving *hesed* that Ruth shows to Naomi and Boaz shows to Ruth?

How can we be *hesed* bearers to those of different faiths in our area? Have we got some ideas we want to take forward?

**Closing Prayers**

### Stage Three – Ruth Chapters 3 & 4

**The story** – Later, seeking security for Ruth, Naomi tells Ruth to take things further with Boaz. Ruth agrees and goes down to the threshing floor at night ...

**Themes** – Sexuality; the importance of the law; fulfilment in family.

#### Notes to understand the text

*Kinsman redeemer* – We are told in 2.20 that Boaz is Naomi's next of kin. In Israelite society that had very definite legal implications which are important in this part of the story. In 3.9, Ruth asks Boaz to marry her because he is next of kin. His response in 3.12-13 is that he is not next of kin but will act as next of kin if the other person refuses. One of the duties of the next of kin was to act as kinsman redeemer (*go'el*), restoring ownership of alienated clan property through redemption (buying back), and also freeing fellow clanspeople from poverty-induced slavery. Scholars are not aware of other instances where the *go'el's* duty included marrying widows, so Ruth's request suggests either that the duties may have been wider than those set out in Lev 25 or that Ruth was pleading with Boaz to go beyond the letter of the law in a spirit of *hesed*.

*The dealings at the gate* – scholars are uncertain about how the details of the legal transaction described at the beginning of Chapter 4 relate to contemporary Israelite practice. Interested readers can find a full discussion of the theories in the commentaries listed in the introduction. For our purposes, what must be understood is that Boaz offers Naomi's lands to the next of kin, who first accepts then changes his mind when he realises he must also marry Ruth. This is because if Ruth bore children his inheritance would have to be shared out between more people. The careful description of the legal process of the events emphasises the importance of law as providing the framework for *hesed* in society.

*Sexual language* – It is important to realise that the narrative is highly charged with sexual language in Chapter 3. Many of the terms have sexual overtones. Most importantly, the word for 'foot' (*regel* in Hebrew) also means 'sexual organs'. Naomi's instructions to Ruth to uncover Boaz's feet and let him tell her what to do are fairly explicit instructions to use her sexuality to achieve the security Naomi wants for her. Whilst we do not know what actually happened, Ruth's behaviour was very sexually provocative and therefore very risky for her.

#### Reading the text

[10 minutes]

*It should be easy to read the story direct from the Bible. Chapters 3 & 4 need the following readers: Narrator, Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, Next of kin, People of Bethlehem, Women of Bethlehem.*

#### Group work

[10 minutes]

*Now split into four equal sized groups: Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, Narrator. Each group is going to get under the skin of one of the characters in the story by thinking about the following questions:*

### **Questions for Naomi**

Why do you tell Ruth to go to the threshing floor? Is it not dangerous, or certainly very risky for her, as she could lose everything? Could she not have security any other way?

Why do you take the child Obed and nurse him? How does Ruth feel about this? What does it mean to have a family again? How will Obed nourish you?

Has God blessed you since returning to Bethlehem? Why?

Where have you experienced fullness and emptiness in this story?

### **Questions for Ruth**

Why do you follow Naomi's instructions and go to the threshing floor? Are you afraid of what might happen? Could you find security for yourself and Naomi in any other way?

Why did Boaz have to offer you to another kinsman first, when he was fond of you? What would you have done if the other kinsman had said yes?

Why did Naomi nurse Obed? Have you forgiven her? Has she changed since he was born?

Are you a proper person here? Are you really accepted for who you are?

Has your behaviour in the story been rewarded by God? Why?

What does it feel like to be the mother of a great family: Do you still feel like a foreigner?

### **Questions for Boaz**

Why do you agree to spread your cloak over Ruth (i.e., marry her)?

Why was it so important to go to the gate and agree the marriage formally?

How do you feel towards Ruth now? Is she still a foreigner? What about Naomi? Who is in charge of bringing up Obed?

Has God rewarded your behaviour towards Ruth and Naomi? Why?

### **Questions for the Storyteller (the book's author)**

Why does Ruth have to seduce Boaz? Could she not find security any other way?

Why does he consent to marry her when she is sexually available to him anyway?

Why do you spend so much time talking about legalities in this bit of the story? How does the practice of *hesed* relate to Jewish law in the story? How does Jewish law relate to God's will for God's people?

Where is fullness and emptiness to be found in Naomi's story? Is that the same for Ruth? What about Boaz?

Why does Ruth the Moabite become mother of a great family which includes King David and Jesus?

## Visiting

[5 minutes]

*One or two of each team volunteer to visit the others with a question: 'How are you fulfilled in this story?' Boaz asks Naomi; Naomi asks Ruth; Ruth asks Boaz.*

*The storyteller group splits up to overhear the others. Then return to groups and report back.*

## Plenary

[5 minutes]

*Everyone comes back together to ask the narrator: 'How are the characters fulfilled in this story? How is  $\eta$ esed rewarded?'*

*Now come out of role for the final part of the study*

## Making connections – what does the passage say to us today?

[20 minutes]

Naomi takes a very prominent place in the upbringing of Obed and he is seen to be her fulfilment. How far do we recognize family as the place of fullness or fulfilment – for women and more generally? Are we good at valuing family life in our culture and in our church communities? Can we learn anything here from experience of other cultures? How could we do things better?

Would we want to challenge anything in the assumptions of the story about the ways that women exercise power through sexuality and childbearing?

In the Bible, Ruth, a foreigner, faces new and seemingly impossible situations against the odds with kindness and courage. She is rewarded by God by becoming the mother of a great family. What were the qualities that Ruth showed in this story? How can we follow her example in the challenges that face our church communities, securing a future and bringing new generations of Christians to birth in difficult times?

Have we got some ideas we want to take forward?

## Closing Prayers



## Study 6: 1 Kings 18

### Elijah and Jezebel

Jay MacLeod

**Text: 1 Kings 16.29-33, 17.1, 18.1-19.4** (Revised English Bible)

*Writer* Ahab son of Omri became King of Israel in the 38th year of Asa king of Judah, and he reigned over Israel in Samaria for twenty-two years. He did more that was wrong in the sight of the Lord than all his predecessors. As if it were not enough for him to follow the sinful ways of Jeroboam son of Nebat, he contracted a marriage with Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of Sidon, and went and worshipped Baal; he prostrated himself before him and erected an altar to him in the temple of Baal which he built in Samaria. He also set up a sacred pole; indeed he did more to provoke the anger of the Lord the God of Israel than all the kings of Israel before him ...

Elijah the Tishbite from Tishbe in Gilead said to Ahab,

*Elijah* I swear by the life of the Lord the God of Israel, whose servant I am, that there will be neither dew nor rain these coming years unless I give the word ...

*Writer* Time went by, and in the third year the word of the Lord came to Elijah: 'Go, appear before Ahab, and I shall send rain on the land.' So Elijah went to show himself to Ahab. At this time the famine in Samaria was at its height, and Ahab summoned Obadiah, the comptroller of his household, a devout worshipper of the Lord. When Jezebel massacred the prophets of the Lord, he had taken a hundred of them, hidden them in caves, fifty by fifty, and sustained them with food and drink. Ahab said to Obadiah,

*Ahab* Let us go throughout the land to every spring and wadi; if we can find enough grass we may keep the horses and mules alive and not lose any of our animals.

*Writer* They divided the land between them for their survey, Ahab himself going one way and Obadiah another. As Obadiah was on his journey, Elijah suddenly confronted him. Obadiah recognized Elijah and prostrated himself before him.

*Obadiah* Can it really be you, my lord Elijah?

*Elijah* Yes; it is I. Go and tell your master that Elijah is here.

*Obadiah* What wrong have I done? Why should you give me into Ahab's hands? He will put me to death. As the Lord your God lives, there is no region or kingdom to which my master has not sent in search of you. If they said, 'He is not here', he made that kingdom or region swear on oath that you could not be found. Yet now you say, 'Go and tell your master that Elijah is here.' What will happen? As soon as I leave you, the spirit of the Lord will carry you away, who knows where? I shall go and tell Ahab, and when he fails to find you, he will kill me. Yet I, your servant, have been a worshipper of the Lord from boyhood. Have you not been told, my lord, what I did when Jezebel put the Lord's prophets to death, how I hid a hundred of them in caves, fifty by fifty, and kept them alive with food and drink? And now you say, 'Go and tell your master that Elijah is here!' He will kill me.

*Elijah* As the Lord of Hosts lives, whose servant I am, I swear that I shall show myself to him this day.

*Writer* So Obadiah went to find Ahab and gave him the message, and Ahab went to confront Elijah. As soon as Ahab saw Elijah, he said to him,

*Ahab* Is it you, you troubler of Israel?

*Elijah* It is not I who have brought trouble on Israel, but you and your father's family, by forsaking the commandments of the Lord and following Baal. Now summon all Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel, including the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of the goddess Asherah, who are attached to Jezebel's household.

*Writer* So Ahab sent throughout the length and breadth of Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah stepped forward towards all the people there and said,

*Elijah* How long will you sit on the fence? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.

*Writer* Not a word did they answer.

*Elijah* I am the only prophet of the Lord still left, but there are four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal. Bring two bulls for us. Let them choose one for themselves, cut it up, and lay it on the wood without setting fire to it, and I shall prepare the other and lay it on the wood without setting fire to it. Then invoke your god by name and I shall invoke the Lord by name; the god who answers by fire, he is God.

*Writer* The people all shouted their approval. Elijah said to the prophets of Baal

*Elijah* Choose one of the bulls and offer it first, for there are more of you; invoke your god by name, but do not set fire to the wood.

*Writer* They took the bull provided for them and offered it, and they invoked Baal by name from morning until noon, crying, 'Baal, answer us'; but there was no sound, no answer. They danced wildly by the altar they had set up. At midday Elijah mocked them:

*Elijah* Call louder, for he is a god. It may be he is deep in thought, or engaged, or on a journey; or he may have gone to sleep and must be woken up.

*Writer* They cried still louder and, as was their custom, gashed themselves with swords and spears until the blood flowed. All afternoon they raved and ranted till the hour of the regular offering, but still there was no sound, no answer, no sign of attention. Elijah said to the people,

*Elijah* Come here to me.

*Writer* And they all came to him. He repaired the altar of the Lord which had been torn down. He took twelve stones, one for each tribe of the sons of Jacob, him who was named Israel by the word of the Lord. With these stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord, and dug a trench round it big enough to hold two measures of seed; he arranged the wood, cut up the bull, and laid it on the wood.

*Elijah* Fill four jars with water and pour it on the whole-offering and on the wood.

*Writer* They did so.

*Elijah* Do it again.

*Writer* They did it again.

*Elijah* Do it a third time.

*Writer* They did it a third time, and the water ran all round the altar and even filled the trench. At the hour of the regular offering the prophet Elijah came forward and prayed,

*Elijah* Lord God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, Lord, answer me and let this people know that you, Lord, are God and that it is you who have brought them back to their allegiance.

*Writer* The fire of the Lord fell, consuming the whole-offering, the wood, the stones, and the earth, and licking up the water in the trench. At the sight the people all bowed with their faces to the ground and cried,

*People* The Lord is God, the Lord is God.

*Elijah* Seize the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape.

*Writer* They were seized, and Elijah took them down to the Kishon and slaughtered them there in the valley. Elijah said to Ahab,

*Elijah* Go back now, eat and drink, for I hear the sound of heavy rain.

*Writer* He did so, while Elijah himself climbed to the crest of Carmel, where he bowed down to the ground and put his face between his knees. He said to his servant,

*Elijah* Go and look toward the west.

*Writer* He went and looked; 'There is nothing to see,' he said. Seven times Elijah ordered him back, and seven times he went. The seventh time he said, 'I see a cloud no bigger than a man's hand, coming up from the west.'

*Elijah* Now go and tell Ahab to harness his chariot and be off, or the rain will stop him.

*Writer* Meanwhile the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, and heavy rain began to fall. Ahab mounted his chariot and set off for Jezreel; and the power of the Lord was on Elijah: he tucked up his robe and ran before Ahab all the way to Jezreel.

When Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done and how he had put all the prophets to the sword, she sent this message to Elijah,

*Jezebel* The gods do the same to me and more, unless by this time tomorrow I have taken your life as you took theirs.

*Writer* In fear he fled for his life, and when he reached Beersheba in Judah he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, and sitting down under it he prayed for death:

*Elijah* It is enough; now, Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers before me.

## Context

One hundred years after the glory days of kings David and Solomon, Israel was a shambles. The nation was partitioned into Judah in the south and Israel in the north. Our story is set in the northern kingdom of Israel. Civil unrest threatened from within and foreign powers from without. In 876 BCE Omri came to power followed by his son Ahab. The writers of the Book of Kings do not have a good word to say about Omri and Ahab. But a secular historian would see them as astute and energetic leaders who brought peace and prosperity. External enemies were converted into trading partners, and commerce, crafts and culture flourished. Jericho was finally rebuilt and new public works included massive fortifications and palaces with delicate decorations of inlaid ivory. Omri and Ahab tried to finesse the vexed issue of inter-religious relations. Native Canaanites still lived in Israel, and they worshipped Baal, a god of fertility and nature. To cement an important international alliance Ahab married Jezebel, princess of Tyre, also a devotee of Baal. A new capital on the hill of Samaria was built, complete with a temple for Baal worship. Thus Ahab provided a place for his chief wife and her foreign courtiers to worship along with his Canaanite subjects. This policy led to the most serious religious crisis in the life of Israel since the casting of the Golden Calf at Sinai.

Echoes of Sinai can be heard in the story of Elijah which would have been told and re-told for generations before being incorporated into the Book of Kings. This part of the Bible from the Book of Judges through to the Second Book of Kings was written and compiled during the exile in Babylon, some three hundred years after the reign of Ahab. The authors were keen to show that all of Israel's problems (especially the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE and the disaster of exile) were caused by the disobedience of the people and especially their kings. Ever since the time of Moses the ancient teachings had been disregarded and the Israelites had failed to be faithful to their God. The Book of Kings is as much confession as history, and the authors are as worried about the present and the future as about the past.

## Group process

*The text is read by the leader who takes the part of Jezebel and by four volunteers. The readers put on name badges: (1) Elijah, (2) Ahab, (3) Obadiah, (4) Writer, (5) Jezebel. The rest of the group takes the part of the People (there is only one line).*

*After the text is read, the leader divides the remainder of the group to go with each reader (1: Elijah, 2: Ahab, 3: Obadiah, 4: Writer, 5: Jezebel). Everyone gets a badge. The leader emphasises that participants identify with their character, imagining themselves into the story. It may help to read parts of the story again. Instead of 'I reckon that Obadiah might have felt like ...', the posture should be: 'I am Obadiah, and I feel ...'. The Jezebel group goes into a different room (or gathers in a place out of earshot of the other groups) and receives separate instructions. Groups 1-4 talk among themselves, imagining themselves into the character as they consider a few questions.*

*The Elijah, Ahab and Obadiah groups consider:*

- What motivates you?
- Whom do you blame?
- Do you compromise or do you overstep?

*The Writer group considers:*

- Why do you include this story in 1 Kings?
- How will it help your readers?

*These four groups discuss the questions for about seven minutes. Then the Elijah, Ahab and Obadiah groups each appoint one or two people to visit each other's groups. Delegates from the Ahab group visit the Elijah group, delegates from the Elijah group visit the Obadiah group, and delegates from the Obadiah group visit the Ahab group. The Writer group splits up to observe these discussions. The Writers' job is to eavesdrop rather than participate. Each delegation begins the conversation with the group they are visiting by saying, 'You troublemaker! You are to blame!' The ensuing conversations will last for about ten minutes, and then the original groups are re-formed so that the delegates can report back to the group and the conversations can be shared. During these three minutes of reporting back in the original groups, the Writer group shares what they have overheard and prepares to kick off the plenary session.*

*The Jezebel group which has met separately now rejoins the group for the plenary session. The Writers begin the plenary by explaining why they have included this story in their history.*

### **Jezebel group**

*Group members imagine themselves into the character of Jezebel and consider these questions:*

- What motivates you?
- Whom do you blame?
- Do you compromise or do you overstep?
- Who is most like you in the story?
- Does that person ever see the similarity?

*After a discussion of seven minutes or so, the leader will invite his or her fellow Jezebels to consider an alternative reading of the text from Jezebel's point of view. It is important that people stay in character, and the following briefing may be helpful, although it would be even better if people came to some of these insights themselves.*

This passage is about the triumph of Elijah over the enemies of the Lord, and you are the chief villain. But there are cracks in the text, and you may be the key to a reading that runs counter to what the writers intended.

The Bible makes plain, not just from this passage but from the story of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kgs 21), that you are ruthlessly cunning and manipulative. If this is true, then you may see subtle details in the story that other readers usually miss:

- In 17.1 Elijah suggests that the rain is withheld on *his* word rather than the Lord's.
- In 18.1 the Lord tells Elijah to bring news to Ahab that the drought will soon be over.

- In 18.17-19, instead of obediently announcing that the drought is over, Elijah instigates the full-scale competition. This challenge, perhaps prompted by Ahab's greeting, can be seen as an unauthorised improvisation by Elijah.
- In 18.37 Elijah is keen not just for God to be vindicated but for *himself* to be acclaimed.

Elijah, like so many heroes, has his dark side. Plagued by his ego, Elijah inflates his own importance. Elijah is regarded by others as the single-minded servant of God but is actually devoted to himself as well. 'It takes one to know one', and you may suspect that Elijah actually manipulates God in the competition on Carmel!

Does your encounter with Elijah in 19.2 make him suddenly realise that he is the mirror image of you? At the height of his success, his self-inflation is punctured and he collapses into despair. Elijah is not simply afraid (by warning him you make his escape possible); he sees his whole life as a complete failure. Has Elijah suddenly realised that far from being polar opposites, you and he actually have a great deal in common? You are both fanatically committed to your faith which you promote by whatever means necessary, including mass murder. You are both violent extremists.

As much as the writers of this story would like to reduce you to the embodiment of evil, they actually provide some details that can be developed in a different direction:

- In 16.32 you are defined as wife and daughter but emerge as fiercely independent of male power and authority, much as Elijah is depicted as fiercely independent of kingly power and authority.
- In 19.1 you swing into action without so much as a word with his majesty your husband. Throughout the story the impression is of you striding through the corridors of power and Ahab cowering in a corner. Elijah has the same effect on Ahab.
- In 18.19 Elijah unwittingly alludes to traits that you and he have in common. The large number of prophets confirms your religious zeal. The fact that they are attached to your household (literally 'eat at the table of Jezebel') shows that (like Elijah in 17.15-16) you are able to provide nourishment even in the midst of famine. The reader also gets a glimpse of your wealth and economic independence.

Seen through your eyes, the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal yields new meanings. As the scholar Phyllis Tribble points out, you and Elijah are mirror images of each other. This interpretation helps us understand Elijah's encounter with God on Mount Horeb and the story of the 'still small voice' (18.5-18). Here we see God refusing to be manipulated by Elijah but gently (even playfully) deflating his self-righteousness and instructing him to get back to work alongside others.

*In a few minutes, the other groups (Elijah, Ahab, Obadiah, Writers) and you will get back together to discuss this passage with everybody staying in character. The Writers group will begin the discussion by saying why they have included this story in their history and what they think readers will get out of it. A good discussion should emerge between the different groups. Try to lie low for awhile, but then at an opportune moment, you (the Jezebel group) will toss a grenade into the discussion:*

- One of you jumps up and brandishes a mirror in front of each member of the Elijah group, demanding that they look at you and asking what they see. 'I am Jezebel. Look at me! What do you see? What do you see? Exactly! You look at me and you see yourself!' You then explain how, far from being opposites, Elijah is actually a mirror image of you: scheming, manipulative, fanatical. You are both religious radicals, violent extremists.
- Another of your group jumps up and confronts the Writers. You take off a pair of glasses and wave them at the Writers, inviting them to look at the text through Jezebel's spectacles. 'The text reads differently from my perspective, doesn't it? When you read the story through my eyes, the context is reversed. Imagine the story taking place on my home turf. Elijah would be condemned for imposing his theology, meddling with politics, stirring up trouble, and murdering prophets. I would be held up as a shining example for remaining faithful to my religious convictions, for supporting my household, and for opposing my enemies unto death.' You sit back down.

### **Plenary discussion**

*The Writers begin the plenary by explaining why they have included this story in their history. People stay in role and continue collectively to chew over the passage. At some point the Jezebel group will stir up the plenary discussion and sparks may begin to fly. Participants can continue to stay in role as they discuss the issues raised. Alternatively (and this is the safer option), people can be invited to remove their badges and to come out of character. A period of silence may be kept for people to re-read the passage and to reflect on it. The leader may say a brief prayer before a general discussion begins. These questions may be useful:*

- Who is Elijah today?
- Who is Ahab today?
- Who is Obadiah today?
- Who is Jezebel today?

*The ensuing discussion is likely to range widely. One needs to trust the process, but if the conversation gets bogged down, the leader may want to pass out (previously prepared) index cards that each of have an issue written on it. These could include:*

1. Apostasy: why does it matter?
2. Caught in the middle: Christians pulled in different directions
3. Competition: common posture for religions
4. Conflict: the dangers of personalising
5. Conversion: how, why and by whom?
6. Conviction and commitment: at the core of faith but distrusted in today's climate?
7. Exclusivism: how to stake out our truth
8. Extremism: radicalisation and recruitment into terrorist politics

9. Fear: expressed, submerged?
10. Greetings: first impressions in inter faith encounter
11. Isolation: the danger of leaders without support
12. Leaders: devoted to God, devoted to self
13. Miracles: what is the point?
14. People: indifferent? confused by competing truth claims?
15. Territory: we were here first
16. Tolerance: are there limits?
17. Victimhood: can it be a trap?
18. Violence: how the cycle can start and end
19. Word of God: is there a drought?

*Pass out the cards and ask people to reflect on their issue(s) in pairs for five minutes. After five minutes warn the participants that they need to distil their thinking on each issue down to one sentence. After a couple of minutes gather everyone together and go quickly around the group, asking each person or pair to give their one-sentence summary.*

*The passage throws up many issues that Christian congregations can debate endlessly. But how does this Bible story prompt us to act? What should the local church do, or do differently? This change of gear may be resisted, but the point of Bible study is that we move from being story-hearers to story-makers. Whether the leader resorts to the index cards or not, s/he should ensure that the discussion reaches its destination: commitment to action.*

### **Bibliography**

- Walter Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth&Helwys, 2000)  
 Trevor Dennis, *Lo and Behold!* (London: SPCK, 1991)  
 Neil Glover, 'Elijah versus the Narrative of Elijah', in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 30.04 (449-462), 2006  
 Gina Hens-Piazza, *1-2 Kings* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon), 2006  
 Peter Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos, 2006)  
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 Phyllis Trible, 'Exegesis for Storytellers and other Strangers', in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114.01 (3-19), 1995  
 Jerome Walsh, *1 Kings* (Collegeville, Minnesota: 1996)  
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## Study 7: 2 Kings 5

### The Healing of Naaman

*Toby and Henriette Howarth*

As Michael Ipgrave's 'Introduction' to this collection makes clear, there are several different kinds of Old Testament text, and many different ways of reading them. This study offers one way, inspired by John Davies' studies of Gospel stories.<sup>1</sup> It is composed of two basic parts:

1. *Exegesis and application*: a reading of the passage from a 'Presence and Engagement' perspective.
2. *Methodology*: a detailed plan of how the passage might be actually used in a 'Presence and Engagement' context.

While we want to share our reading of the text, it is important to note that the group doing the Bible study in this particular case does not need to be familiar with this exegesis for the study to 'work'. The exegesis is provided for the study leader and for any who might want to read further after completing the group exercise.

#### **The Text: 2 Kings 5: 1-19 (NRSV)**

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favour with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy.<sup>2</sup> Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife.<sup>3</sup> She said to her mistress, 'If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.'<sup>4</sup> So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said.<sup>5</sup> And the king of Aram said, 'Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel.'

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments.<sup>6</sup> He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, 'When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.'<sup>7</sup> When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, 'Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.'

8 But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, 'Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.'<sup>9</sup> So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house.<sup>10</sup> Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, 'Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.'<sup>11</sup> But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, 'I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!<sup>12</sup> Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?' He turned and went away in a rage.<sup>13</sup> But his servants approached and said to him, 'Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it?'

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<sup>1</sup> John Davies, *Only Say the Word* (Norwich: Canterbury, 2002).

How much more, when all he said to you was, “Wash, and be clean”?’<sup>14</sup> So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

15 Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, ‘Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant.’<sup>16</sup> But he said, ‘As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!’ He urged him to accept, but he refused.<sup>17</sup> Then Naaman said, ‘If not, please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt-offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord.’<sup>18</sup> But may the Lord pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant on this one count.’<sup>19</sup> He said to him, ‘Go in peace.’

## **Exegesis and Application**

### ***The Choice of this Passage***

We chose this passage for inclusion in the studies because it is a fairly well known Old Testament story in which the God of Israel heals a person of another faith through the intervention of a Jewish girl and God’s prophet. There are clear ‘inter faith’ issues in the text itself, and the story is quoted by Jesus (Lk 4.27).

The study was prepared by making a close reading of the passage both by reading the Hebrew text with commentaries, and by ‘trying it out’ in four different ‘pilot’ contexts. In three of these pilot studies, participants came ‘unprepared’ for the study, and a number of particular issues came out as they engaged with the text which we have brought into our discussion of the text. Since 1 and 2 Kings are themselves theological in their outlook and approach, we felt justified in taking a theological approach ourselves. In particular, we focus on the way in which the books of Kings help us to reflect on complicated historical situations, events and relationships in the light of the bigger Covenant story.

### ***Commentaries***

We consulted several commentaries in our preparation, and recommend the following as particularly helpful:

Gray, John, *1&2 Kings* (Old Testament Library, London: SCM Press, 1977)

Nelson, Richard D., *First and Second Kings* (Interpretation, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1987)

Brueggemann, Walter, *1 and 2 Kings* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2000)

### ***Introduction to the book of Kings***

The books of Kings are a work of theological history which most likely took its final shape in the first years of the Babylonian exile. It is rooted in the political, social and historical context of the time and it gives the main lines of history, but through a theological lens. It tells the story of the people of Israel in Palestine from the last days of King David to the captivity of Judah into Babylonian exile, with the various kings presented in relation to their covenant commitment. Gray suggests as a subtitle for the books, ‘The Hebrew monarchy: its Rise, Decline and Fall.’ The fall of the monarchy results in the Babylonian exile. Nelson

suggests that the primary aim of the book is to help the Israelite people in Babylonian exile to find answers to questions of identity like: Who are we? How did we get to be who we are and where we are?

### ***Context of the text***

The immediate context is a collection of stories about the prophet Elisha and his miracles. There is also a theme of the political relations of enmity between Aram and Israel (see 1 Kgs 20). The text we have chosen is the first half of a longer story, with the second half dealing with the attempt by Elisha's servant deceitfully to get his hands on some of the presents which his master has refused from Naaman. Although, as Nelson shows, the two halves of the story are designed to work with each other, we felt that the whole narrative was too long to use for a group study. The issue of making money out of religion may still usefully come up in the study.

## **Reading the Text in a 'Presence and Engagement' Context**

### ***Identity and Confidence***

The main way in which the passage spoke to the participants in the study was as an encouragement. Engagement with people of other faiths can frequently be seen as daunting and confusing by Christians because of the complexity of the issues that it raises and the lack of experience that many Christians have in this area. What does my faith have to say in this context? How can I avoid causing offence? What do I do with my fears, not least in relation to Islam, given the current context of the global 'war on terror'?

This passage, compiled probably in the context of the people of Israel in Babylon learning to 'sing the Lord's song in a strange land' (Ps 137.4) speaks powerfully to 'Presence and Engagement' parishes today. It is a story in which people meet across faith lines in a situation fraught with issues of power, suffering, inequality, politics and war. The story begins with the words that *through him (Naaman) the Lord had given victory to Aram*, with the clear implication that this victory was at the expense of God's own people, Israel. How could it be that God should give victory to those who should be his enemies? And yet, the 'hero' of the story is a nameless young Israelite servant girl whose courage and grasp of her own heritage is the means by which God brings about an extraordinary transformation with international consequences!

Somehow, the Israelite girl understands that Israel's calling is not just to be blessed, but to be a blessing, and that this blessing is for the nations, even enemy nations. This text makes clear that nobody has exclusive rights to God. Yes, God is the God of Israel and works miracles through his prophets. But God is also the God of the little servant girl and also becomes the God of Naaman.

### ***Power and subversion***

The text makes a lot of the contrast between the presentation of Naaman and that of the slave girl. He is a powerful enemy, important, rich and respected within his own circles. He is a valiant soldier. *BUT he had leprosy* In the Hebrew his illness is recounted with just one

word at the end of the sentence. What a damper on the life of a great man! In contrast, the girl is young and a slave. She has no life or voice of her own. But whereas the presentation of Naaman ends with the shock of his leprosy, the presentation of the girl ends with the shocking fact that she has something to say and to give!

Naaman and the slave girl are presented as contrasts: the highest and the lowest in the Syrian social system. It is surprising that there is any real connection or communication between them, let alone obedience or attention of Naaman to what she says. But both Naaman and his king take the girl's words to heart.

As the story progresses, there is more subversion of normal power relations. The King of Aram writes his letter to his political counterpart, the King of Israel. But it becomes clear that this king does not have the power to help. He rather sends Naaman on to the prophet. The story implies that worldly power does not equate with spiritual power, but the two do refer to each other. Naaman continues to be portrayed as wealthy, but the story shows that wealth is also not a guarantee of spiritual power. The prophet has no interest in wealth (vs. 16). In vs. 9 the contrast and surprise continue. Naaman shows up with his military show of power at Elisha's defenceless house, but Elisha, surprisingly, doesn't even come out to greet him. Power is expressed territorially, with the great rivers of Damascus compared with the meagre Jordan. But after his healing, Naaman wants to take Israelite earth back home on which to worship. Naaman reacts with the anger and indignation that comes when traditional power is snubbed, but it is his servants who persuade him to listen to and obey the prophet.

'Presence and engagement' today take place against a complex background of power and weakness. Britain is perceived by many people of other faiths as a 'Christian' country in which Christians have power, but that is not the way that most Christians see their own position. They may form the majority nationally, but in many 'Presence and Engagement' parishes, they are a small minority with elderly congregations meeting in the shadow of large other faith congregations.

Particularly in relation to Islam, power and territory are also important. The White British and 'Christian' colonial heritage of military and political power is a live memory for many people from another faith background. But at the same time, British Muslims are struggling with their own heritage of a 'majority theology' in a context in which they make up only 3% of the larger population. The perception of many British Muslims, reinforced by images from *Al Jazeera* TV, is that Muslims are suffering at the hands of others the world over. At the same time increasing numbers of British Christians fear a takeover of the European Christian heartlands by radical Islam. This text shows that God's power is subversive of traditional power relationships and is characterised by love (the servant girl's concern for her master), courage, humour and joy.

### ***Conversion and ambiguity***

The way that the text is written shows a parallel between verses 11-19 and verses 1-10. There is repetition but also clear progress in the story. Naaman is not the same man at the end as he was in the beginning. Not only is he healed (physical change) he is also spiritually transformed. His anger has changed to peace and his arrogance to humility. His trust in kings and wealth has changed into obedience to the prophet and the God of Israel.

This is a story of contrast, surprise, healing and change. It shows what the God of Israel is capable of achieving. It shows that people, however set in their ways or stubborn in their beliefs they may seem, can change.

At the same time, there is ambiguity in the way that the story ends. Naaman is worried about the implications of his conversion when he goes home. How is he to act when his professional role obliges him to go into the temple of another god? Other questions hang in the air: what will he do when he is next asked by his king to attack an Israelite village? Will he seek to persuade others in Aram of his new found belief in the God of Israel? How is this all going to work out for him and his family? Elisha does not give any instructions. The writer does not attempt to tie up the ends of the story by telling us what happens when Naaman gets home. Instead, all we are left with is the word 'shalom', peace. Naaman goes away with a sense of freedom to work out what it means to be a man of faith in his own context.

Presence and engagement today has often to live with ambiguity as well as hope for healing and conversion. Many converts to Christianity, like Naaman, have to walk a difficult line with their families and friends. Churches involved in neighbourhood regeneration and Church schools with many pupils of other faiths have to work through difficult issues about Christian ethos in a multi faith context. There are new and difficult questions about the place and way of evangelism in a multi faith context. This text speaks to such contexts with faith and hope that can live with ambiguity. The God of the little servant girl and the God of Elisha is a God of gracious and generous love.

## **A Method for Group Study**

*The following study has been designed for (and used by) a large group of, ideally, between 30 and 50 people (this could be, for example, a Deanery Synod, a small church congregation or a local study day). This method is designed to help the Bible speak both through and to people who have little or no formal training, as well as those who have more theological background. The study is done in 'teams'. The point is for us all to discover together what God is saying to us as we interact with the text and with each other.*

*The study is done in three parts: 'Ignition' where we first read the story (10 minutes), 'Exploration' where we look in groups more closely at the story from the perspective of different characters (35 minutes), and 'Destination' where we think about at what the story means for us today (15 minutes).*

*The study leader can prepare for the study by reading the exegetical material, above. It is important that the study leader has also prepared carefully the 'mechanics' of the study so that participants are not distracted by anxiety over practical details. The leader needs eight copies of the text from the Dramatised Bible for volunteers to read from. It is helpful if each team has its own leader who is familiar with the way the Bible study will be organised (see below). Each 'team' needs pre-prepared stickers with the name of the team's character written on it. The team questions should also be prepared on slips of paper, and given to team leaders. It can be helpful also to have a list of teams, and 'visiting' instructions on a screen or flipchart.*

### **Part One: 'Ignition'**

*[10 minutes]*

The story is read right the way through from the *Dramatised Bible* version. This requires eight readers. After this reading, the group divides into pairs or threes to go through the story again, so that participants are familiar with the details and have a chance to share briefly what strikes them as they read it.

### **Part Two: 'Exploration'**

#### **Activity One**

*[5 minutes]*

*The group is split (randomly) into six 'teams' (the Study Leader counting off 1-6): (1) Naaman, (2) The Israelite Servant Girl, (3) The King of Israel, (4) Elisha the Prophet, (5) Naaman's Servants, (6) The Writer of the Book of Kings.*

*Each 'team' brings their chairs into a little huddle. Each team member is identified with a sticky label and imaginatively identifies with the character of their team. The focus is on the character's role. Teams look at the passage and address together questions provided on slips of paper. Some participants may be nervous about what they perceive as 'role play' and need to be reassured that they do not need to do any 'acting', especially in front of others.*

*Questions for the Naaman team:*

- What are my strengths?
- What are the problems I face in this story?
- What do I feel like on the way home?

*Questions for the Servant Girl team:*

- What do I feel like about my master and his wife?
- How am I weak in this story?
- How am I strong in this story?
- Where are my loyalties?

*Questions for the King of Israel team:*

- What are my strengths?
- What are my weaknesses in this story?
- What is behind the letter from the King of Aram?

*Questions for the Elisha team:*

- Why do I not go out to see Naaman, but just send a messenger?
- What do I think God is doing through me?
- What do I feel about this?
- Why do I send Naaman on his way in peace?

*Questions for the Naaman's Servants team:*

- What do we feel about going with Naaman on the journey to Samaria?
- Why do we persuade him to wash in the Jordan?
- What do we feel when we see that Naaman is healed?

*Questions for the Writer of the Book of Kings team:*

- Why did we include this story in our book?
- What were the risks of including it?

### **Activity Two**

*[5 minutes]*

*Each team chooses two members to visit another team, still in character. The visitors ask the*

question to the team that they are visiting: 'In what way am I (are we) a problem for you?' 'Naaman pair' goes to the Servant Girl team; 'Servant Girl pair' goes to the King of Israel team; 'The King of Israel pair' goes to the Elisha team; The 'Elisha pair' goes to the Naaman's Servants team; The 'Naaman's Servants' pair goes to the Naaman team. Meanwhile, the 'Writer' team divides up evenly and listens in on the different conversations of other teams.

### **Activity Three**

[3 minutes]

Visitors return home so that both delegates and 'home' members can share briefly what happened.

### **Activity Four**

[10 minutes]

The whole group, staying in their various characters, comes back into plenary for a discussion led by the 'writer' team who start off by saying why they thought that the story was worth writing down and including in their book.

At the end of this part, all participants remove their labels and come 'out of character'. There is a brief time of silence and a short prayer from the Study Leader.

### **Part Three: 'Destination'**

[15 minutes]

For this part, the group stays in plenary, and the study leader guides a discussion focusing on our response to the passage as Christian disciples living in a multi faith society.

It may be helpful to discuss three questions (based on the three parts of the 'Exegesis and Application', above):

- How might the little Israelite servant girl be an encouragement or inspiration to those in different 'Presence and Engagement' parish contexts?
- Where is the power and wealth in 'Presence and Engagement' communities, where does it fail, and what can the church offer?
- What are situations that we experience or can think of in a multi faith context in which God may be saying, 'Go in peace!'



## Study 8: Psalm 48

### Jerusalem the Dwelling of God

Michael Ipgrave

#### Engaging with the Psalms

The Psalms are texts which have come down to us from the worship of ancient Israel, and they have been formative for the worship of both Jews and Christians throughout the centuries. In the history of Christian spirituality, they were especially esteemed as being the very texts which Christ himself recited, and in using them the faithful have from the first centuries sensed that they are praying them in the name of Christ. In the Middle Ages, the recitation of the Psalter was particularly central to monastic life, providing a rhythm of prayer to structure the day. When the English Reformation adapted a shortened form of the monastic office to form the services of Morning and Evening Prayer, it was the intention that the psalms should be made available on a regular basis to the whole body of the Church. Generations of Anglicans have indeed grown up nurtured by the psalmody of the Book of Common Prayer, and for this reason the well-loved BCP text is provided for this study, as well as the more accurate version of the New Revised Standard Version.

Why give such preference to the Psalms? Because hymns are human compositions, but the Psalms are the songs of the Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

As liturgical and poetic texts, the psalms cannot be approached in the same way as prose texts. As they are used in worship and devotion, they engage the mind and imagination at several different levels. One way of expressing this multi-dimensionality has been through the medieval idea of four 'senses of scripture' – that a text addresses us in terms of history, of belief, of action, and of hope.

The literal sense teaches the things done  
The allegorical sense, what you should believe  
The moral sense, what you should do  
The anagogical sense, where you are heading.<sup>2</sup>

This is the approach adopted in this study: notes are first provided on the historic setting of the psalm, then activities are suggested through which its sense can be linked to the beliefs, experiences, and hopes of contemporary Christians. In other words, we are asking these four questions:

1. What has the text meant historically for Israel as the People of God?
2. How does it speak to the church's identity today – who do we think we are?

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1. St Basil of Caesarea, *Letter 207*.

2. This verse summary, popular in medieval theology, was devised by the Franciscan biblical scholar Nicholas of Lyra (1270-1340): *Litera res docet / Quid credas allegoria / Moralis quid agas / Quo tendas anagogia*,

3. How does it resonate with the experiences of congregations in their parishes – what should be our priorities for action?
4. How does it point us to the future – what is the hope that sustains us?

The last three questions can in turn be linked to key themes which usually surface in the life of parishes set in areas with a significant presence of people of other faiths. The *Presence and Engagement* report puts it like this:

Summing up the core anxieties that in one way or another face most local churches are three cross-cutting themes:

*Identity.* Identity is not a static or single-layered reality ... to engage with people and communities of other faiths than our own, is to enrich our identity not diminish it.

*Confidence.* True confidence lies not in numbers or in power but in the way of incarnation, the cross and resurrection ... to lead people back to a confidence in God rather than in inherited ways of doing things.

*Sustainability.* What are the ways in which churches can be adventurous and enterprising in the new situation ... What are the sources which sustain churches spiritually?<sup>3</sup>

Applying these questions to Psalm 48 in particular, it is clear that the central motif of this text is Zion, which appears variously as God's city, as his mountain, and as his temple of God. In the four parts of this study, we will take Zion to represent in turn:

1. the city of Jerusalem, a historical and geographical reality in Israel / Palestine;
2. the mystical or spiritual body of believers, the Church which gives Christians their sense of identity;
3. the visible and tangible parish church, the focus of the congregation's confidence in their activities; and;
4. the beckoning and challenging symbol of the Kingdom, the hope which sustains our common life.

Some *key words* likely to emerge from this study of Psalm 48 are: security; beleaguerment; devotion; sustainability; remembrance; particularity; universality; hospitality.

The first step in engaging with a biblical text is to read it through, attentively, slowly, and preferably out loud as a group exercise. Two English translations of Psalm 48 are provided here; others can also be used, and people whose native language is not English might also like to contribute a version in their own mother tongue.

As the psalm is read through, it is good to note down any key verses or phrases which particularly catch the imagination – either in themselves, or because they are points at which the different translations differ markedly from one another. The notes which follow in the first part of this study pick up on some of these key passages.

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3. *Presence and Engagement: The Churches' Task in a Multi-Faith Society* (General Synod of the Church of England, 2005), pp. 16-17.

## The Text: Psalm 48

(Book of Common Prayer)

*Magnus Dominus*

1 Great is the Lord, and highly to be praised: in the city of our God, even upon his holy hill.

2 The hill of Zion is a fair place, and the joy of the whole earth: upon the north-side lieth the city of the great King; God is well-known in her palaces as a sure refuge

3 For lo, the kings of the earth: are gathered, and gone by together.

4 They marvelled to see such things: they were astonished and suddenly cast down.

5 Fear came there upon them, and sorrow: as upon a woman in her travail.

6 Thou shalt break the ships of the sea: through the east wind.

7 Like as we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our God: God upholdeth the same for ever.

8 We wait for thy loving-kindness, O God: in the midst of thy temple.

9 O God, according to thy Name, so is thy praise unto the world's end: thy right hand is full of righteousness.

10 Let the mount Zion rejoice, and the daughter of Judah be glad: because of thy judgments.

11 Walk about Zion, and go round about her: and tell the towers thereof.

12 Mark well her bulwarks, set up her houses: that ye may tell them that come after.

13 For this God is our God for ever and ever: he shall be our guide unto death.

(New Revised Standard Version)

*A Song. A Psalm of the Korahites*

1 Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God. His holy mountain,

2 beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth. Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King. 3 Within its citadels God has shown himself a sure defence.

4 Then the kings assembled, they came on together.

5 As soon as they saw it, they were astounded; they were in panic, they took to flight;

6 trembling took hold of them there, pains as of a woman in labour,

7 as when an east wind shatters the ships of Tarshish.

8 As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the LORD of hosts, in the city of our God, which God establishes forever. *Selah*.

9 We ponder your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple.

10 Your name, O God, like your praise, reaches to the end of the earth. Your right hand is filled with victory.

11 Let Mount Zion be glad, let the towns of Judah rejoice because of your judgements.

12 Walk about Zion, go all around it, count its towers,

13 consider well its ramparts; go through its citadels, that you may tell the next generation

14 that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will be our guide forever.

### Notes on the text of Psalm 48

(Title). *The Korahites* were probably a guild of musicians in the Jerusalem temple.

2. *Mount Zion in the far north*. The Hebrew word *Zaphon* used here can indeed mean 'north', but this would not have been a very plausible way for the Israelites to describe Zion, which is in fact in the far south of the settled area of Israel. However, *Zaphon* is also the

name of the holy mountain on which, according to Ugaritic texts,<sup>4</sup> the chief god Ba'al dwelt. So, in referring to Mount Zion as 'Zaphon', the psalm is implicitly asserting, against the claim of the Ba'al cult, that it is in Jerusalem that the true God, the LORD, dwells in reality.

*City of the great King.* The 'king' referred to here is probably God in his royal attributes, but Zion was also the sanctuary particularly associated with the royal family of Israel, the Davidic dynasty. In fact, divine and human kingship are inextricably linked in the psalm's way of thinking. Like several of the 'Zion' psalms, Ps 48 celebrates the unshakeable order established by God and mirrored in the ordering of society through God's anointed king.

4. *The kings assembled.* The psalm here begins a brief narrative section, telling of an attack on Jerusalem led by a league of kings, and of their defeat by the LORD. The story of conflict is recited here to proclaim the mysterious, invincible power of God who guards his people.

7. *Ships of Tarshish.* These would have been large and splendid vessels used for trade and in warfare. This verse may be likening the defeat of the kings to the scattering of ships by a storm (so NRSV), or it may recount an actual defeat of an invading fleet.

8. *As we have heard, so have we seen.* The story which has been recited is also to be celebrated in visual form through the drama of the temple cult. In some way, the rite of worship brings home to its participants an intensified awareness of the actuality of the story they have heard recalled.

9. *We ponder your steadfast love.* The precise interpretation of these words is uncertain. The Hebrew verb *damah* has as its root meaning 'to represent, to make a likeness of', and this may refer to a symbolic ritual drama enacting the victory of God over his enemies. It may also be taken in an interior sense, 'to make a likeness in one's mind', and thus 'to meditate' or 'to ponder' (as in the NRSV translation). This in turn leads to a third sense, found in the Greek and Latin versions: 'to take up', 'to receive' or 'to entertain' (this is the sense also which lies behind the BCP's rendering of the verb as 'to wait for'). Whatever translation is used, the sense is that the faithful love of God becomes again a reality present in the lives of the worshippers.

12. *Walk about Zion.* At this point in the ritual, it is likely a procession of the worshippers around the temple or around the city would have begun.

14. *Our guide forever.* Literally, 'our guide to death' (so BCP).

### ***Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God: Psalm 48 in history***

This psalm almost certainly developed from songs used by participants in the festival worship of the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem. It repeats the story of an attack of other nations on the city of God, and of the confusion and dispersal of these enemies, leading to thanksgiving for God's faithful love, an expression of devotion to Zion as his dwelling, and a commitment to pass on faith in God to future generations.

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4. Texts discovered from the ancient Canaanite city of Ugarit, near Lattakia in modern Syria. Zaphon was just north of Ugarit, and this may explain its name.

It may be that at the origin of this psalm lies remembrance of a historic attack on Jerusalem, such as that mounted by the Assyrians in 701 BC. However, this memory is now taken up through worship into a timeless affirmation of God's presence in his sanctuary, his faithfulness to his people, and his invincibility. It belongs to a strand of Old Testament writing that stresses the importance of settlement in a locality, rather than nomadic travelling. As such, it reflects themes from the Canaanite culture which the people of Israel encountered on entering the Land, though these themes are transformed, and in some ways challenged, through faith in the LORD.

The central motif of Psalm 48 is clearly Zion, which features in three different but interlocked aspects: as mountain, as city, and as temple. Zion is a holy mountain (verses 1-2, 11). The text can be seen alongside, and challenging, Canaanite traditions of mountains as the dwelling-places of the gods, in particular in the cult of Ba'al. The psalm's claim is that, in reality, it is Zion that is the true locus for the Godhead.

On the mountain is built the city of God (verses 1, 3, 8, 12-13), a centre of human society uniquely favoured by the divine presence. This society is governed by, its welfare intimately linked with, the Davidic king anointed by God. There is in the Old Testament a tension between two ways of thinking. On one hand is a 'royal' theology, presented here, stressing the unconditional nature of God's choice of Israel and David, and so the inviolable nature of Zion. On the other hand, a 'prophetic' strand warns against complacency, insisting that God's covenant carries judgement as well as blessing. This tension has persisted throughout history: over the centuries, Jerusalem has in fact become, and continues to be, a place of conflict and division between different peoples and nations, as well as a place holy to Jews, Christians and Muslims.

In the city stands the temple of the LORD (verse 9), the place where the invincible love of God is recalled and celebrated. In the course of Jewish history, the one temple in Jerusalem came first to be supplemented, and then replaced, by local synagogues in every dispersed community. Nevertheless, its destruction is still marked by fasting and lamentation, and the longing for Zion has remained strong in Jewish spirituality:

From west and east, north and south, from every side, accept the greetings of those near and far, and the blessings of this captive of desire, who sheds his tears like the dew of Hermon, and longs to have them fall upon you hills ... The air of your land is the very life of the soul, the grains of your dust are flowing myrrh, your rivers are honey from the comb.<sup>5</sup>

### ***In the midst of your temple: Psalm 48 and the community of faith***

In Christian interpretation of Psalm 48, 'Zion', the holy city, has been seen as a symbol of the spiritual community of all believers. St Augustine, for example, writes: 'That is our city, if we are members of the King, who is the head of the same city'.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the city of Zion is identified as the Body of Christ, the company of those whose belief binds them as members

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5. From the *Ode to Zion* of Judah ha-Levi (c.1075–1141). The poem was used in the laments of the Ninth of Av, the day which commemorated the destruction of the Temple.
  6. Augustine, *Exposition on the Psalms*, XLVII, 2.

to Christ as Head. In fact, this kind of reading begins before Christianity, when the Greek version translates verse 9 as ‘in the midst of your people’:<sup>7</sup> the physical temple has become here, as in the New Testament,<sup>8</sup> a metaphor for the human community as the place where God’s mercy is received. At times, this view has relied on crude ‘replacement theology’: that God has replaced the Jewish people in his favour with Christians. Such a view, though, cannot be reconciled with God’s continuing faithfulness, which will not abandon his covenanted people. Nevertheless, Christians also may ‘sing the songs of Zion’; indeed, at the heart of a Christian understanding of the psalms is the experience of worshipping as God’s people. Often this is most clearly expressed in hymns such as John Newton’s great song of trust, assurance and defiance:

Glorious things of thee are spoken / Zion, city of our God<sup>9</sup>  
 He whose word cannot be broken / Formed thee for his own abode  
 On the Rock of Ages founded / Who can shake they sure repose?  
 With salvation’s walls surrounded / Thou may’st smile at all thy foes

Saviour, if of Zion’s city<sup>10</sup> / I through grace a member am  
 Let the world deride or pity / I will glory in thy name  
 Fading is the worldling’s pleasure / All his boasted pomp and show  
 Solid joys and lasting treasure / None but Zion’s children know

When ‘Zion’ is understood in this way as the community of believers, some important points about the Church’s mission emerge from the Psalm:

- God’s people will experience real and concerted opposition (v. 4), but they are sustained and defended by his power.
- The protection of God gives his people a sense of security (v. 9), which should make them confident in sharing his mercy with others.<sup>11</sup>
- God’s name is honoured particularly within the Church, but ‘reaches to the end of the earth’ (v. 10): God’s mission is both particular and universal.

### **Group discussions**

*Form into two groups to discuss the following questions:*

[Group 1]. What do we identify as threats to God’s people today?

[Group 2] Whom do we identify as God’s people today?

*The two groups then join to discuss:*

[Groups 1 and 2 together] How should God’s people relate to the threats of today?

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7. Septuagint, Ps 47.9.

8. E.g. 2 Cor 6.16; Eph 2.21.

9. The opening words of the hymn refer to Ps 87.3; the rest of the verse paraphrases Ps 48.1-8.

10. Some versions, including Newton’s original, have ‘since’ in place of ‘if’, reflecting the different degrees of assurance about their status of salvation which different Christians have felt.

11. In St Benedict’s *Rule* for monks, Ps 48.9 is a verse of hospitality, recited by the abbot and the entire community after honouring guests with the ceremony of washing their feet – *R.B.*, 53.

### **Walk about Zion, go all around it: Psalm 48 and the parish church**

For most people of faith, one of the most powerful ways of experiencing the reality of the holy is through a building set aside as a sanctuary, a place where the presence of God is honoured and his name remembered. The Qur'an speaks of God's light

Shining out in houses of worship. God has ordained that they be raised high and that His name be remembered in them, with men in them celebrating his glory morning and evening.<sup>12</sup>

Sikhs will come to worship in the *guru-dwara*, the 'door' or 'house' of the true guru who is God, and Hindus in the *mandir*, literally the 'dwelling place' of the deity. It is interesting to see that the shrines are often covered in the *mandir* by a *shikhara*, a towering canopy whose shape recalls the Himalayas, home of the gods: the symbol of the mountain is both the divine dwelling-place and an architectural feature.

It is natural and appropriate in the same way for Christians to read the 'Zion' of Psalm 48 in terms of their local parish church. The church building is for them the place where God is especially honoured as his name is remembered and his praises sung. It is a place which is to be loved and cared for by its congregation, as a sacramental sign of his presence. It is also, like a mountain, a visible feature of the landscape, seen in different ways by the faithful and by those outside the community of faith. The Psalm then points to some different ways in which people in parishes may experience their relationship with their church building:

- It may be a place to be noticed and promoted as a central point of the whole community, above other places of meeting and worship (verses 1-2).
- It may be a place which feels as if it is under attack, creating a sense of beleaguerment in the congregation (verse 4).
- It may be somewhere to feel secure in knowledge of the faithful mercy of God (verse 9).
- It may be a place from which a mission of praise and joy goes out to the surrounding community (verse 10).
- It may be a place whose fabric is to be carefully and lovingly tended as a sign of God's presence (verses 12-13).

#### **Activities**

- *Identify five words or phrases from the psalm that particularly strike you and write them on pieces of card. Then walk around the church and put each in the place which seems most appropriate to you. Afterwards, explain and discuss your choices with one another.*
- *Walk around your parish or neighbourhood in pairs and note or sketch the five most prominent buildings near your church. Discuss with one another how your church building compares with each of these – for example, in age, in size, in prominence, in accessibility, and in standard of upkeep.*

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12. *al-Nūr*, 24.36 (translated by Muhammad Abdel Haleem).

***Tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever:***

**Psalm 48 and the hope of the Kingdom**

'Jerusalem' in the Bible means not only the earthly city as it is known now in all its pain and division, but also the hope of that city healed and unified as a sign of the Kingdom which God promises. It is with the expectant vision of a new Jerusalem, in which there is no need of a temple, that the whole Bible ends:

I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is with mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them."<sup>13</sup>

The psalm also ends by looking to the future, giving the last word not to the city itself but to God for whom the city is a dwelling place (verses 13-14). The hope expressed here is twofold: as an immediate goal, the sustainability of the community of faith into the near future, the 'next generation' (13), a sustainability dependent on the community living through passing on the identity of God; in the long term, indeed for eternity, the victory of God's mercy guiding his creation through the ultimate horizon of death (14). As Christians, we are called into local communities to be signs and sources of hope for the Kingdom. To fulfil that role, we need to be confident about our sustainability in the future, and we need to have some discernment of what we mean by 'Kingdom'.

***Two debates***

- *Form teams to argue for and against the proposition 'That we have good reason to hope this church will be here and be flourishing in 25 years time'.*
- *Form teams to argue for one or other of the following as the better expression of the Christian hope for the new Jerusalem:*

Jerusalem the golden / With milk and honey blest  
Beneath thy contemplation / Sink heart and voice oprest  
I know not, O I know not / What social joys are there  
What radiancy of glory / What light beyond compare

O sweet and blessed country / Shall I ever see thy face?  
O sweet and blessed country / Shall I ever win thy grace?  
Exult, O dust and ashes / The Lord shall be thy part  
His only, his for ever / Thou shalt be, and thou art.

*or*

Bring me my bow of burning gold / Bring me my arrows of desire  
Bring me my spear! O, clouds unfold! / Bring me my chariot of fire!

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13. Rev 21.2-3.



I will not cease from mental fight / Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand  
Till we have built Jerusalem / In England's green and pleasant land

## Study 9: Jeremiah 29

### The Letter of Jeremiah

*Jonathan David*

#### **The Text: Jeremiah 29.1-23 (NRSV)**

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. <sup>2</sup> This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. It said: <sup>4</sup> Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup> Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup> Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. <sup>7</sup> But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. <sup>8</sup> For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, <sup>9</sup> for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD.

<sup>10</sup> For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup> For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. <sup>12</sup> Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. <sup>13</sup> When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, <sup>14</sup> I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

<sup>15</sup> Because you have said, 'The LORD has raised up prophets for us in Babylon', – <sup>16</sup> Thus says the LORD concerning the king who sits on the throne of David, and concerning all the people who live in this city, your kinsfolk who did not go out with you into exile: <sup>17</sup> Thus says the LORD of hosts, I am going to let loose on them sword, famine, and pestilence, and I will make them like rotten figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten. <sup>18</sup> I will pursue them with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence, and will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be an object of cursing, and horror, and hissing, and a derision among all the nations where I have driven them, <sup>19</sup> because they did not heed my words, says the LORD, when I persistently sent to you my servants the prophets, but they would not listen, says the LORD. <sup>20</sup> But now, all you exiles whom I sent away from Jerusalem to Babylon, hear the word of the LORD: <sup>21</sup> Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning Ahab son of Kolaiah and Zedekiah son of Maaseiah, who are prophesying a lie to you in my name: I am going to deliver them into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and he shall kill them before your eyes. <sup>22</sup> And on account of them this curse shall be used by all the exiles from Judah in Babylon: 'The LORD make you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire,' <sup>23</sup> because they have perpetrated outrage in Israel and have committed adultery with their neighbours' wives, and have spoken in my name lying words that I did not command them; I am the one who knows and bears witness, says the LORD.

## Method – Part One

[45 minutes]

*The Study Leader explains the background to the text:*

Jeremiah was born when Manasseh was ruling. Around age 21, he became a prophet. In this passage, he is writing to the Judeans who were taken into Babylonian exile in 587 BCE. He is writing to enlighten and encourage them in Babylon as they had lost their freedom, their homes, relatives, friends, their means to make a living, and they were now captives. The situation seemed hopeless. The so-called false prophets had convinced the people that their stay in Babylon would be for two years (verses 8-9). Thus, there was no need to settle down and try to resume a normal life.

It is in this context that Jeremiah writes this letter telling them the opposite. Considering that the Judeans might be there as long as seventy years (10), Jeremiah told them to build houses, set up homes & families. So this small Jewish remnant was holding the future of God's great plan (10). Interestingly, it is not masses, but individuals and small groups of people (as in our churches in the UK) who are chosen to hold the future of God's great plans, which remain beyond our comprehension and imagination.

*The passage is read aloud in the whole group. Then in pairs or threes, familiarising themselves with the text, people can share briefly what strikes them. Or they can straight away be divided into the teams as below.*

*The group is split (randomly) into four 'teams' as follows, each representing one character or set of characters from the passage: Team 1: Migrant Jews; Team 2: Native Babylonians; Team 3: False prophets; Team 4: Jeremiah the Prophet.*

*Each team member, identified with a sticky label, uses her or his imagination to get into the feeling of the given character.*

*The focus is on the character's role. Teams look at the passage and address the following questions:*

*Questions for Team 1 (Migrant Jews)*

- How do we feel in this foreign land?
- Why are we here?
- What are the problems we face?
- Where are our loyalties?

*Questions for Team 2 (Native Babylonians)*

- How do we feel about the immigrants in our homeland?
- Why do we think they are here?
- How should we treat them?

*Questions for Team 3 (False prophets)*

- Who are we and what is our message?
- How do we feel about what Jeremiah is saying?

*Questions for Team 4 (Jeremiah the Prophet)*

- How do we feel about what has happened to Israel?
- Why have we written this letter?

*Continuing in their team characters, all come back into plenary for a debate led by the Study Leader, around the question:*

Who is right – Jeremiah, or others claiming to be the prophets?

**Method – Part Two**

[45 minutes]

*The Study Leader guides people to go back into the same four 'teams', but with a different modern and contemporary character this time, as follows: Team 1: Immigrants in the UK; Team 2: Indigenous people in the UK; Team 3: False prophetic voices; Team 4: True prophetic voices.*

*Each team member, identified with a sticky label, uses her or his imagination to get into the feeling of the given character.*

*The focus is on the character's role. Teams address the following questions:*

*Questions for Team 1 (Immigrants in the UK)*

- How do we feel in this foreign land?
- Why are we here?
- What are the problems, we face?
- Where are our loyalties?

*Questions for Team 2 (Indigenous people in the UK)*

- How do we feel about the immigrants in our homeland?
- Why do we think they are here?
- How should we treat them?

*Questions for Team 3 (False prophetic voices)*

- Can we identify voices in the UK that are unhelpful?

- Who are they and what is their message?

*Questions for Team 4 (True prophetic voices)*

- How do we feel about what is happening to the UK?
- How might Jeremiah's letter speak to our situations in the UK today?

*Continuing in their team characters, all come back into plenary for a discussion led by the Study Leader, around the questions:*

- Can we as Christians play a prophetic role?
- If no, why?
- If yes, why and how?

*All come out of their team characters and collectively deliberate, as led by the Study Leader, around this question:*

Following our discussions, are there any practical steps to be taken by us, as individuals or as a community?

### **Notes for the Study Leader:**

#### **Application of the Passage with a 'Presence and Engagement' Perspective**

##### ***Identity and Confidence***

Disturbing as it may sound, it is a fact that many churches are struggling for survival. Membership is increasingly declining, which has considerable financial implications for mission and outreach projects. Churches are therefore more inward looking, both locally – concerned about the future of the buildings – and nationally – concerned about financial viability, and so constantly reviewing and restructuring. People are being 'problem-centred' than 'solution-focused', and so resisting creative ideas. In multi-faith contexts, our struggles can become more threatening, when compared with other places of worship which may be thriving in the neighbourhood.

Such a contextual setting of the Church(es) is crucial to keep in mind while engaging in this Biblical study or reflection, as the context has a significant impact on the ecclesiology and theology of the churches and individuals in multi-faith settings.

Although the situation in this passage (that of direct emigration of Jews) may not resonate with native British Christians, it is directly applicable to Christian migrants, with significant implications for migrants of other faith origins too.

However, the message of the passage can be applicable to native Christians too, as they are in a minority in certain local contexts such as Luton, and therefore feel (or at times are made to feel) alien within their own homeland. Therefore, the following questions arise:

- How did the Babylonians behave with the migrant minorities of Jews attempting to settle down? What are the lessons, if any, for the native British Christians to learn from that?
- How did the Jews behave with or perceive the Babylonians as the indigenous majorities of their times (which is why Jeremiah had to write this letter)? Are there any lessons for migrant Christians to learn from that?

And then of course the overall burden – how non-Christians could be blessed by being brought to a so-called Christian, prosperous western nation such as the UK?

Jeremiah's letter contains a message for us all – native Christians in particular – in the sense that if the exiles had lost everything but their lives, and were still asked to re-start, physically and spiritually in a foreign or heathen land, how should we handle a situation (depressing as we may consider) where we feel swamped by the migrants of other cultures, nations and faiths?

The issue of the false prophets also poses challenge for Christians as to how to discern who is false or true, in an 'intra Christian' or an 'inter faith' context?

### ***Power and Subversion***

As already highlighted by Toby and Henriette Howarth in their Bible Study on Naaman,

'Presence and engagement' today takes place against a complex background of power and weakness ... The White British and 'Christian' colonial heritage of military and political power is a live memory for many people from another faith background. The perception of many British Muslims, reinforced by images from Al Jazeera TV, is that Muslims are suffering at the hands of others the world over. At the same time increasing numbers of British Christians fear a takeover of the European Christian heartlands by radical Islam.<sup>1</sup>

The text of Jeremiah's letter however, conveys quite distinctly the message that God's power is subversive of traditional power relationships. God's power seeks to be characterised by personal, inter communal and neighbourly relationships (as Jeremiah asks Jews to marry, and to pray and work for the prosperity of Babylon). This is encouraging for both groups – the migrants as well as the natives. The message of the passage can be applied directly to the migrant Christians in UK, but there is a message for the British natives too, which can help them counter their prejudice and fears of being taken over, when they learn that it is in the well being of Britain that the migrants seek their own well being.

### ***Conversion and Ambiguity***

Although Jeremiah's letter is quite instructive, prescribing a way of life for Jewish settlers by mixing and mingling, it does not deal with issues such as

- What other mechanisms, if any, were available to deal with people's feeling of being uprooted and displaced?

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<sup>1</sup> See Study 7 above. I have taken from that study the same three themes identified there as relating to 'Presence and Engagement'.

- What about the settlers who finally did follow Jeremiah's instructions and did mix and mingle, and those who did not?
- Were there further (intra-Jewish) sanctions executed by those settlers in Babylon against those identified as false prophets (Ahab and Zedekiah – Jer 29.21-22), or against the followers of the false prophets?
- How does one discern who is being prophetic and who is true or false? How long does Jeremiah keep identifying the false prophets?
- Was there, or was there not, solidarity, or alternatively discrimination, between the migrating Jews and those who had stayed behind in Israel?
- Why and how did some have to leave while others stayed behind?

There is teaching and preaching for peace and prosperity but no evidence of it. It may appear that Jeremiah's letter had resolved all disputes, doubts and dilemmas, but to what extent it actually had or had not done so is not clear. Nor does the letter testify to the healing of those who were physically, emotionally, and spiritually hurt or abused, or to the transformation of those (Jewish or Babylonians) who might have inflicted the hurt, pain or abuse. Further, there is no mention of the people's (Jewish settlers or Babylonian natives) anger, bewilderment or frustration that may have changed to peace, or their arrogance (political or spiritual) that may have turned to humility. Nor is there evidence as to whether Jeremiah's letter had changed his people into obedience, to him as well as to the God of Israel whom he proclaimed.

However, this is a story, like most others, which shows what the God of Israel is capable of achieving through his people. Of course, the privilege of being his people does come with huge responsibilities of treading the difficult and challenging paths in life's real socio-political and economic circumstances, and with serious implications too (as in the case of Jewish Settlers in Babylon). So the privilege of being his people obligates people to have trust and hope in the unseen and unforeseeable, the yet to come, rather than believing in a god of instant dramatic action and transformation. It shows that people, set and stubborn in their ways and beliefs in any age or era, have been and will continue to be called to change.

Many migrating Christians, like these Jewish migrants, are trapped in fundamentalist claims of their faith, led by modern false prophets, and those who move in an opposite direction are accused of being compromising liberals in their approach to life, and of being too accommodating to people of other faiths in particular.

I wonder if Jeremiah had or would have sent any Mission Partners to work on inter community relations in Babylon to rehabilitate the Jewish settlers and help them see a way of living, professing and proclaiming faith in an inter faith context, if he would have provided any scriptural study to equip Jewish settlers, as we are doing today.

Despite all ambiguity, it comes out very clear that God's plans are long term and not of instant transformation. This means that we are called to remain faithful, steadfast and ever ready pilgrims in order to move and to be displaced, physically as well as spiritually, to live in inter faith contexts and still to be able to share, and to be the reason for the blessings of others, even of those we may perceive as our enemies.

## Study 10: The Book of Jonah

### Transformation and Resurrection

John Davies

*In this study, text in italics is for guidance of the Leader or Presenter. Text in roman format is for material to be shared with the members, either on paper or on screen. The biblical references given for the Editorial Board are essential; without them, the exercise would require an unlikely degree of familiarity with the books of the prophets; with them, members can get quickly into the main evidences for the attitudes represented. We are not suggesting that the four prophets concerned did actually convene in this manner. But they do represent themes and attitudes which were current during the period when the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures was being established. And this device does enable members to recognise the range of diverse attitudes represented in the Scriptures, and the tension underlying their formation. As well as the inspiration which we believe caused the original writing, there must have been inspiration in the work of unknown committees which decided which of the available texts were to be treated as authoritative and which not – a matter which has surfaced into popular awareness in the last year or two. Some attitudes which we might find distasteful are certainly there; we have to recognise this, and we use our own discernment as to how much authority to give them. This is not a new problem – how many times have you heard the Book of Nahum being read at a main service on a Sunday?*

*Jonah is a very unusual text in the Bible. Some people will find it absurd, ludicrous, and laugh at it. Others will wish to take it very seriously and want to find precise and universal meanings in it. Some will be happy to see it as a joke, while others may feel that such a suggestion is blasphemous. So it may well be divisive, and this will in itself provide subject-matter for exploration in honesty. This fits in with a problem in the text itself, the question of why such a story got currency at all? The story puts the Hebrew prophet in a thoroughly bad light is this merely to give an example of honesty in telling our history; or is it to tell us to admit our failures, or to find virtues in our enemies, or what? In the differing responses of Jonah, of the Sailors, and of the Ninevites, it asks us whether we evaluate people more by their theology and belief or by their behaviour (there are significant differences between the latter two groups). And how far should we expect change to happen from the top, or, even in a cruel and oppressive population like the Ninevites, to come as a popular upsurge? These are questions which, we may think, make this book very suitable for study in an inter faith context. More than most texts, this is one which requires its readers to make a judgement for themselves. Like the more extended parables of Jesus, it is not finished; the Parable of the Prodigal Son (so-called) ends in a series of dots ... — will the Elder Son join the party, and therefore will the Pharisees and Scribes join Jesus in the party with the prostitutes and sinners? Equally, will Jonah see the point? Will he join the Ninevite reformation? And, therefore for us, can we turn a habit of complaint into a programme of praise?<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> This is a key question also at the end of the formative process of Acts 10.1–11.18 – a story which also begins in the fairly unprepossessing location of Joppa.



*So, like Jesus's parables, Jonah is provocative. It will raise the question of who we are in the story, where we see virtue, and where we feel sympathy. It does not fit easily into the usual categories of Law, Prophets, Wisdom. It does not depend on your classification or identity. If you agree that it is a good text to use in an inter faith context, perhaps the next one should be the Song of Songs.*

*This study is in three phases – - 'starting where we are', 'exploration there and then', and 'returning to the here and now'. The first phase is necessary as a means of ensuring that everyone gets a chance to have a voice right from the start. There will be time later on for experts on various subjects to have their say; but in the first phase, each person is an expert in their own experience and outlook.*

*Ideally, the total membership should be about thirty. This would make it possible to have a proper group for the Sailors and perhaps separate teams for the People and the King of Nineveh. It can be useful also to have teams for the fish, the psalmist, the sun, the plant, etc. A 'team' should obviously not be less than two; but three is a quite workable number. A team of six is likely to be getting too large for each member to be able to contribute.<sup>2</sup>*

### **Starting where we are.**

Have you had an experience of you or your group doing the wrong thing and some other person or group doing the right thing (especially where the other person or group is deeply different to yourself)?

*The above question is given to the members without much introduction. The group breaks into teams of four people each; about 5 minutes in the teams, then a quick plenary to see if there are specially interesting stories to share.*

*The text is read in dramatised version – about 7 minutes.*

### **Exploration – there and then**

*The following groups are formed. These can be based on the existing teams, two of which can form Group 1. Groups 2, 3, 4, and 5 should have at least two members. In Group 1, Nahum and Isaiah should both have at least two members. A brief introduction draws attention to two aspects. (1) The story tells of a move from the small towards the large, from the powerless to the powerful; Jerusalem (Jonah's base) was centre of an independent state for only a short time, long ago, while Nineveh was the biggest city in the world, powerful, oppressive, slave-making. As a story of the meeting between people of differing faith traditions, the types of prayer described may be very revealing (the Qur'ān, which calls Jonah an Apostle, says that Jonah was delivered from the fish on account of the virtue of his praise;*

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<sup>2</sup> I have developed a 'dialogue version' of this study, made after use in a conference of about 90 people; on that occasion, we divided the conference into two 'universes' each containing a full set of teams which operated independently. That text is copyright; it has been published in *Dandelions and Thistles*, edited by Jan Sutch Pickard – Wild Goose Publications of the Iona Community.

*if he had not sung his psalm, which technically looks so out of place, he would have been allowed to die inside the fish<sup>3</sup>). (2) Jonah is told to go eastwards, across land, by a reasonably safe and conventional route. But he disobeys by going west, by a dangerous route, by sea, a mode of transport alien to himself and his people – costly and courageous.*

*The groups are provided with their questions on paper, and told that they will have about 12 minutes for this stage. Each member is given a sticky label to state their identity.*

**Group 1.** You are the Editorial Board.

Your task is to decide whether the Author's text is acceptable for inclusion in Holy Scripture. Consider both the theology and the implications. Your members are:

*Nahum* – your attitude towards Nineveh can be reckoned from Nah 1.1-3; 2.3 – 3.3.

*Zephaniah* – your attitude towards Nineveh can be reckoned from Zeph 2.13-15.

*Jeremiah* – your attitude towards people who change mistaken policies can be reckoned from Jer 18.1–10

*Isaiah* – your attitude towards Assyria (which includes Nineveh) can be reckoned from Is 19.23–25

**Group 2.** You are The LORD.

What do you think of the image and character of yourself conveyed by the Author's rendering of the story?

What do you think of the theology of the man Jonah, of the sailors, of the Ninevites?

What do you think of their prayers? How do you respond?

As Creator, how do you feel about the way in which the Author uses items of your creation such as fish, the sea, worms, plants, etc?

Would you wish to see some amendments?

**Group 3.** You are Jonah.

As an otherwise almost unknown prophet (2 Kgs 14.25), do you accept the high-profile role that the Author has given you? Are you happy with this sort of publicity, or would you wish to claim protection under Official Secrets legislation?

How far are you happy with the theology which is attributed to you? How well does your prayer fit in with your theology?

How do you feel about the sailors?

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<sup>3</sup> *al-Şāffāt* 37.143, cf. also *al-Qalam* 68.49.

How do you feel about the Ninevites?

How do you feel about the way in which all sorts of things are used to make impact on you – the sea, fish, plant, sun, etc?

Are there any amendments which you would wish to propose?

**Group 4.** You are the Ninevites (King and ‘common people’).

What do you feel about the role, image and character that you have been given in this story? Are you happy with this?

What do you think about other characters in the story, particularly Jonah himself and the sailors?

What do you think about the Lord? Do you pray? How and why?

Why do you respond so dramatically to Jonah’s message?

**Group 5.** You are the Author.

Why have you written such an unconventional piece – what is the main aim (and secondary aims)?

Do you expect that it will be accepted as a serious theological contribution?

What do you intend as you describe the theological beliefs and the behaviour of the sailors?

What do you intend as you describe the responses of the Ninevites?

Do you expect readers to believe that what you are saying is true? If so, how are you going to convince the Editorial Board that your contribution can fit into the rest of the Scriptures?

### **Groups visiting**

*The Leader interrupts the conversations. New instructions are provided for the groups. There are no specific requirements for anyone to visit anyone else – it is up to the groups to take their own initiative, and perhaps obstruct each other. About 12 minutes can be allowed. At the end of that time, the Leader asks all the groups to go back to their original places and share experience, while the Editorial Board tries to make its decision*

*The Editorial Board.* Either as individual members of the Board or as the whole Board, you may summon representatives of other groups to consult them, and they may come to seek to influence you.

*The LORD.* Make your comments in the first instance to the Author, then to the Editorial Board, or you may prefer to wait for the Editorial Board to summon you.

*Jonah.* Make any comments either to the Author or to the Editorial Board.

*The people and King of Nineveh.* You may consult with Jonah, and make your comments to the Author.

*The Author.* Be ready to give an account of your intentions to the Editorial Board, and also to receive representations from Jonah, and other characters in your story. And you may take the initiative in consulting anyone else.

*The Editorial Board is invited to give its judgement on the original question, and there may be comments from other groups in response. 5 –10 minutes.*

### **Moving on – returning to the here and now**

*The Leader asks members to remove labels and come back into the present tense. It may be useful to give members a minute or two of silence, in which to come back into the here-and-now and to seek inspiration about the implications of the previous phase. Members then group into their original teams, to consider the following questions. It is best if each team can choose one question to give primary attention to, but teams should not feel limited to the questions supplied. Each team should try to identify ONE main issue arising, which they would wish to communicate to the others by means of paper on the wall. 20 minutes*

*The following are only sample questions. The Leader should supply questions appropriate to the local context. The Leader should also give the groups freedom to follow their own sense of where the study has connected to their local situation.*

Who, for you, would be ‘sailors’ and ‘Ninevites’?

Of the various kinds of prayer in the story, which makes most sense to you? Which fits best with your own understanding, and with the impression which you have of the prayers of other types and traditions?

Go back to the opening question of this study. What may you expect to happen when you are theologically right but actively wrong?

How does God use jokes to get the truth across to you?

How does resurrection happen for you?

What does this story tell us in our particular situation? Who does it commend? Who does it accuse? What directions does it point us towards?

*Plenary to draw out the main issues and themes. 15 minutes*

## **Presence and Engagement: Some Resources**

*Guy Wilkinson*