

**THE GREAT PROPHETS
OF ISRAEL:
ISAIAH, JEREMIAH
AND EZEKIEL**

Then We clearly declared to the Children of Israel in the Book: 'Twice you will work corruption in the earth and will act with great arrogance.' So, when the time for the fulfilment of the first prophecy drew near, We raised against you some of Our servants who were full of might, and they ran over the whole of your land. This was a prophecy (verily) fulfilled.

(The Qur'an, 17:4-5, Bani Isra'il—
The Children of Israel)

Following the death of Suleyman, the united kingdom split into two states: Judea, which included Jerusalem, in the south, and Israel in the north. They were frequently at war with each other, a fact the Bible attributes to the divisive policies of Solomon, though it could as easily be deduced from the same sections of the Bible that the decline was due to arrogance, tribalism and a total neglect of God. Thanks to the ensuing weakness, in 721 BCE the Assyrians invaded the northern kingdom, deporting its leaders and bringing in settlers from Syria and Mesopotamia (2 Kings 17), although a number of the original Israelites were allowed to remain. Judea itself was conquered in 587 BCE by

Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon. He destroyed the towns and cities and deported the people to Babylon and elsewhere. All of this came to pass despite prophetic warnings.

Just as David and Solomon were Prophets within very particular, different, contexts, so too were the Great Prophets of Israel, as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are often known. Respectively, according to biographical details in the Bible, the first spoke to the Children of Israel while both the kingdoms of Israel and Judea still existed, the second while there was only one kingdom, Judea, remaining, and the third, from a position of exile.

With the possible exception of Ezekiel, whom some Muslims identify with the Qur'anic figure of Dhu'l-Kifl, none of these Prophets is mentioned by name in the Qur'anic text. However, like the Qur'an's unnamed Prophets, they acted as stern warners to the Children of Israel, and they find a place in Islamic tradition (Ibn Kathir devotes brief chapters to each of them in his *Stories of the Prophets*, for example). In terms of seeing the Bible from a non-Jewish perspective, the supra-national aspect of their message is consistent with a destiny in which the message of One God goes further than the religio-national limits of the Children of Israel. In other words, the Great Prophets spoke of something for everyone. Though many of their words in the Bible do show them reaffirming God's promise to the Children of Israel, this can be seen as relatively less important in terms of its national application.

What is significant about these men is that they were, and still are, regarded as the greatest prophets of Israel, whose words contain the finest aspirations of the people and the wellspring of their claims to be champions of justice. They are words which also mark the change of orientation in the biblical understanding of what followers of the Bible believe that God required of the Children of Israel, namely, a change from fear to love.

What we find is that, again, the twin streams discussed earlier are present. There is the call to return to God, to trust in God, to worship and love God, to submit to God, a message that resonates universally. However, there is also the message that seems to reinforce the ‘stiff neck’, the arrogance, a message that seems to imply that a struggle with God is the divinely sanctioned destiny of the Jewish people, that it is, in fact, the whole point of the Jewish people. This part of the message is essentially nationalistic.

The sense of development and the paradoxical nature of the message of the Prophets themselves, contrasts with the Islamic understanding that the Prophets brought the same message from Adam onwards. Though they are not explicitly mentioned in the Qur’an, these, the Great Prophets, can be seen in this light. In view of the destruction that consumed the Kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE and the destruction of Judea and Jerusalem in 587-586 BCE, with a repetition of the same in 70 CE, it would seem that this call to submit to God and to change heart was the key message, and that the Jews’ failure to do so brought this retribution upon them.

Traditionally among non-Jews this has been an area keenly studied by Christians looking for prophecies concerning Jesus. However, there are numerous references in the Bible that cannot be explained simply in terms of the Messiah of the Jewish people. Instead, they oblige us to look further: further into the future, further into the past, and also further south. There we find their magnificent culmination, in an altogether different kind of orientation

The first major Prophet to say much about this alternative was Isaiah. He was a courtier in the southern kingdom of Judah whose career spanned over fifty years in the second half of the eighth century BCE. The book of Isaiah is consequently one of the longest in the Hebrew Bible—only Genesis and the Psalms are longer. Its authorship has been disputed: it is often seen as containing a First Isaiah and Second Isaiah, and sometimes even a Third Isaiah. It is also believed to have been written at least a hundred years after

the death of Isaiah himself, with parts perhaps being as recent as the fourth century BCE. Because of this it is often contradictory, so that Isaiah has often meant very different things to different people.

For Jews, he is the first of the Great Prophets, for he is considered to be the Prophet who announces a different relationship between God and Israel, one that changes from fear to love. There are two aspects though, to this 'Jewish Isaiah'. He is both a stern warner who rages at his people, and a bringer of good news who confirms Israel's blessing.

The 'Christian Isaiah' takes this one step further; and, of all the books in the Jewish Bible, it is to Isaiah that Christians turn most for prophecies of the coming of Jesus as Messiah. The book is even called the Fifth Gospel by some Christians. Some of these prophecies are the same ones that are used by Jewish interpreters, but they are seen from a different viewpoint.

It is, however, the 'Muslim Isaiah' who is probably most surprising, to non-Muslims at least. Muslims look at many of Isaiah's prophecies, some of which are important to the above views and some of which are not, and see them, not as predictions of the coming of Jesus as the bringer of a universal faith, but as predictions of the coming of Muhammad, 'the burden of Arabia' (Isaiah 21:13).

The Book of Isaiah is 66 chapters long and can be seen as falling into five sections of approximately equal length. Four of the five are addressed to the people of Jerusalem (chapters 40-55 are addressed to the exiled Babylonian community in the 6th Century BCE) and the common themes are an attack on arrogance, appeals to justice and to righteousness, and the importance and holiness of Zion and Jerusalem. Though the times were fraught with danger, Isaiah advocated that Judea spurn alliances and rely on God alone.

The first section, up to the end of Chapter 12, attacks the arrogance and hypocrisy of 'the rulers of Sodom' (Isaiah 1:10) as Isaiah calls Jerusalem's leaders, and calls for a new form of worship, or at least a pure one:

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Sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot abide with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek judgement, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.

(Isaiah 1:13-17)

He promises that with repentance and willingness and obedience his people 'shall eat of the good of the land' though as we shall see with Ezekiel later, there is no real expectation that this will happen. Nonetheless, it is important to see that there is a repeated stress on the fact that obedience is an option. When Isaiah experiences a vision of heaven, God tells him:

Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and convert, and be healed.

(Isaiah 6:9-10)

Isaiah also promises a better time when, famously, swords shall be beaten into ploughshares (Isaiah 2:4) and 'the wolf shall dwell with the lamb' (Isaiah 11:6). This will be in the last days when the 'the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow into it.' (Isaiah 2:2) Great victories will be achieved against the enemies of Israel (Isaiah 11:4) and a royal saviour will come, a prophecy that has been

interpreted as affirming the Jewish Messiah, Jesus (most famously in Handel's musical oratorio 'The Messiah'):

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God ('hero' in one version), the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and his peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgement and with justice from henceforth even for ever.

(Isaiah 9:6-7)

As Jesus neither formed a government nor established justice nor peace—he rather renounced any such claim in Matthew 10:34—we find that these are better interpreted as features of the life of another.

On the whole it is hard to see a distinctive point of view within the prophecies of Isaiah, in the first section or any others. They promise blessings one moment, and tribulations the next; at times they seem to be about Isaiah's times, and at others, about some indefinite time, at one moment historical time, the next—at least to Muslim ears—the Day of Judgement.

In the second section, until the end of Chapter 27, the pattern continues as Isaiah prophesies concerning the nations. It is here, though, that hints of that other, a non-Jewish prophet, begin to emerge. Again it is suggested that great good will come to Israel; but also great calamity. Isaiah, in the vision of 'the desert of the sea' recounts how 'he saw a chariot with a couple of horsemen, a chariot of asses, and a chariot of camels' (Isaiah 21:7). Here the chariot has been seen as symbolic of David's entry into Jerusalem, the ass of Jesus' entry, and the camels of Muhammad's successor, 'Umar, on his entry into the city. The later part of this chapter then elaborates on what Isaiah calls this 'awesome

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vision', and tells what could be the story of the Prophet Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Madina:

The burden upon Arabia. In the Forest in Arabia shall ye lodge, o ye travelling companies of Dedanim. The inhabitants of Tema brought water to him that was thirsty, they prevented with their bread him that fled. For they fled from the swords, from the drawn sword and from the bent bow, and from the grievousness of war. For thus saith the Lord unto me, Within a year, according to the years of an hireling, and all the glory of Kedar [in Ezekiel 27:21 Kedar is synonymous with Arabs in general] shall fail [...] the mighty men of the children of Kedar, shall be diminished: for the Lord God of Israel hath spoken it.

(Isaiah 21: 13-17)

After his prophecies concerning the people of the region, in the third section to the end of Chapter 39, Isaiah returns his focus to his own people with a vengeance. He rails against the drunkenness of the priests, the 'tables [...] full of vomit and filthiness' (Isaiah 28:7-8), and then immediately asks who the one shall be who can receive knowledge. His rhetorical answer is: 'Them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts' (Isaiah 28:9), and this is the first of several parts of this section that Muslims have seen to refer to Muhammad. As we will see, when the Prophet ﷺ arrives at the site of the Temple in Jerusalem during the Night Journey, he is offered two cups, one of wine, the other of milk. His choice of milk at the place where wine had caused such desecration in Isaiah's time transformed the drinking of wine in Islam from something discouraged into something forbidden outright.

Another reference reminds us of the very process of the reception of revelation. The Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad over a period of twenty-three years; and the bearing of the word of God, transmitted to him by Jibril, the

Angel Gabriel, was often a shattering experience that initially left the Prophet speechless and fearful for his sanity. It is no Jesus figure who is described when Isaiah says:

For precept must be upon precept, precept on precept;
line upon line, line upon line; here a little and there a
little: For with stammering lips and *another tongue* [my
italics] will he speak to his people.

(Isaiah 28:10-11)

The parallels go further because when Jibril first came to the Prophet ﷺ he gave the command: '*Iqra*'!, a word which can mean both 'Recite' or 'Read'. 'I am not a reciter!' the Prophet replied. In a Hadith, the Prophet continued that this happened three times, each time the angel crushing him to his limit and then releasing him, with the same dialogue occurring each time, until the Angel says:

'Recite in the name of thy Lord who created! Who
createth man from a clot of blood. Recite, and the Lord
is the Most Bountiful, He who hath taught by the pen,
taught man what he knew not.'

(Qur'an 96:1-5)

Astonishingly, we find this prophecy in the chapter following 'precept upon precept':

And the book is delivered to him that is not learned,
saying, Read this, I pray thee, and he saith, I am not
learned.

(Isaiah 29:12)

In Sura 75, also a very early address to the Prophet Muhammad (upon him be peace), we find a further parallel, this time with the prediction of 'stammering lips': 'Move not thy tongue with the Qur'an to make haste therewith.' And

the ‘burden of Arabia’: could this be 73:5: ‘We shall send down upon you a heavy word?’

The fourth section of Isaiah, from Chapter 40 until the end of Chapter 55, is addressed to the Babylonian community and again calls the people back to the worship of One God and to the rejection of idolatry. At the opening of Chapter 40 we find another reference to a destiny that is possibly beyond Israel, saying that Jerusalem should take comfort, for her wars have (or possibly will have) ceased: ‘The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’ (Isaiah 40:3) In Arabic, the word *Shari‘a*, usually the term given to the system of Islamic law, originally meant simply a straight track that led to an oasis. The opening chapter of the Qur’an, prays: ‘Guide us to the straight path.’ (1:6)

As the section progresses, the prophecies become more specific and in Chapter 42 we find more references to a Prophet who will come: (a) with a law, which is (b) for the Gentiles, and who (c) is not discouraged until (d) he achieves this aim, criteria that Jesus does not fulfil, but which could be the criteria that convinced some of the Jews at the time of the Prophet that he was the one they had been waiting for:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him; he shall bring forth judgement unto the Gentiles. He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street. [...] He shall bring forth judgement unto truth. He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgement in the earth: and the isles shall wait for his law.

(Isaiah 42:1-4)

The same chapter talks of the former things coming to pass and the singing of a new song, but this is to take place in the villages of Kedar, which, as we have seen, are the villages of

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Arabia, which are textually next to, and which geographically contain, 'the inhabitants of the rock'. Again it says that this Prophet 'shall prevail' and that he will arouse jealousy.

I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; to open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house. I am the Lord: that is my name: and my glory I will not give to another, neither my praise to graven images. Behold, the former things are come to pass, and new things do I declare: before they spring forth I tell of them. Sing unto the Lord a new song, and his praise from the end of the earth, ye that go down to the sea and all that is therein; the isles and the inhabitants thereof. Let the villages lift up their voice, the villages that Kedar doth inhabit: let the inhabitants of the rock sing, let them shout from the top of the mountains. Let them give glory unto the Lord, and declare his praise in the islands. The lord shall go forth as a mighty man, he shall stir up jealousy like a man of war: I shall cry, yea, roar: he shall prevail against his enemies.

(Isaiah 42:6-13)

The fifth section, which runs from Chapter 56 until the end, begins with the announcement that the Lord's 'salvation is near to come, and (his) righteousness to be revealed' (Isaiah 56:1), and carries forward this developing vision of the Arabian destiny by recalling the Ishmaelite line of Abraham's family and their restoration:

Neither let the son of the stranger, that hath joined himself to the Lord, speak, saying, The Lord hath utterly separated me from his people [... Let] also the sons of the stranger, that join themselves to the Lord, to serve him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be his servants,

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every one that keepeth the Sabbath from polluting it, and taketh hold of my covenant; Even them will I bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer.

(Isaiah 56:3 & 6-7)

After this universal vision, there is an astonishing, though typical, change of tone to 'All ye beasts of the field, come to devour.' (Isaiah 56:9) It is as if the writer is horrified that destiny is passing from the hands of Israel, and he is also dictating, for the chapter finishes with the biblical equivalent of: 'I've had enough, let's go down to the pub, horror of the priests' drunkenness notwithstanding: 'Come ye, say they, I will fetch wine, and we will fill ourselves with strong drink; and tomorrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.' (56:12)

The next day, though, brings more of the same: prophecies that enlarge the compass of divine blessing and guidance beyond the people of Israel:

Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the Lord shall arise upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. Lift up thine eyes round about, and see: all they gather themselves together, and thine heart shall fear, and be enlarged; because the abundance of the sea shall be converted unto thee, the forces of the Gentiles shall come unto thee.

(Isaiah 60: 1-5)

Up until this point, Christians would be happy with this quotation, but then we are told who these gentiles are. They are the descendants of the children of Abraham who were born of Keturah, Abraham's wife after Hagar and Sarah. Genesis 25 names all of these peoples as the children of

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Keturah, except Kedar who was a son of Ishmael but who was, like the others, Arab.

The multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all they from Sheba shall come: they shall bring gold and incense; and they shall shew forth the praises of the Lord. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered together unto thee: they come up with acceptance on mine altar, and I will glorify the house of my glory.

(Isaiah 60: 5-7)

The final chapter (66) sees the dominant themes of the book coming together. The blessings, the need for a purer way of praising God, the warnings, and the one to come. A rhetorical question is asked: 'Where is the house that ye build unto me? And where is my place of rest?' (Isaiah 66:1) And then: 'All those things have been, saith the Lord: but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.' (Isaiah 66:2) This cannot be Isaiah, who is not poor. Nor did Jesus tremble. But this is what God wants now in place of sacrifice.

We are then told that they did not hear. The Lord called but received no answer. And *they did not hear*. We can ask ourselves, Who did hear? Whose *name* means that God heard him? Who, according to the Bible, was hated and cast out by his brother's mother? The answer can only be Ishmael, and here also things get turned around:

Hear the word of the Lord, ye that tremble at his word;
Your brethren that hated you, that cast you out for my
name's sake, said: Let the Lord be glorified: but he shall
appear to your joy, and they shall be ashamed.

(Isaiah 66:5)

The remainder alternates between trial and triumph, chariots like a whirlwind and the comfort of Jerusalem, to which shall

go all the nations. This culminates in the closing two verses that contain one of the few visions of Hellfire in Hebrew, immediately after what appears to be an optimistic end:

For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I shall make, shall remain before me, saith the Lord, so shall your seed and your name remain. And it shall come to pass that from one new moon to another, and from one Sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the Lord. And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh.

(Isaiah 66:22-24)

So disturbing have Jews found this end to one of the most important books of the Hebrew Bible that when it is read in Synagogue, the section beginning 'the new heavens and the new earth' is often repeated at the end. The Qur'an says that the Children of Israel sometimes killed their Prophets, and a strong Talmudic tradition asserts that this was the fate that met Isaiah in the reign of the idol-worshipping King Manasseh. If this was so, it is not likely that he was mourned greatly by some of the priests of the Temple either. In his description of the Suffering Servant, often seen by Christians as one of his prophecies concerning Jesus, but understood by Jews to refer to the suffering of the Jewish people, we can see Isaiah himself:

He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

(Isaiah 53:5-6)

When the question of authorship is considered, the fact that most authorities believe that the books were written so far after Isaiah's time makes the book(s) difficult to trust. The Isaiah phenomenon seems to be a very human one in which the soul of Israel appears to struggle with itself through the author or authors. The text is at one moment reassuring, and the next disturbing, sensing where this perilous state of affairs is leading. Where it is leading—to the coming of a servant of the Lord, or perhaps two—seems to break through this timeless struggle almost against the will of the writer, who is confronted again and again by predictions of all nations worshipping God, with the Children of Ishmael leading them.

If, as serious scholarship suggests, it is accepted that the words of Isaiah were not accurately recorded in the book which bears his name, then we need to consider the motivations of those who recorded them. Certainly, Jewish writers would have wished to keep their own destiny as a central feature. Though they have not discarded the critical element of Isaiah, the shift of the divine judgement from post-historical time, the Day of Judgement, to end-historical time, the Final Days, illustrates the sort of changes that may have been made.

What is most interesting, though, is not what was distorted or added, but rather, what was allowed to remain. The Islamic thesis seems so credible in Isaiah (and elsewhere) because, until the coming of the Prophet Muhammad, the verses that have been highlighted here would have appeared to Jews and Christians as just another set of obscure biblical byways. In the light of the events of the life of the Prophet, they begin to look more like highways, even the Straight Path mentioned earlier (Isaiah 40:3), albeit heading in an unexpected direction. The extreme reluctance in the telling of the vision of Arabia at the start of Chapter 21 suggests perhaps that the direction wasn't so much unexpected as unwished for.

This is an unashamedly partisan position, because it selects what is useful to its argument and counts it as more than the rest. I would argue, in view of the above, that it is the only way of reconciling the paradoxes of the text. Yes, the blessings upon the tribe of Israel are confirmed, though not in quite the way they have been traditionally seen. Yes, the Children of Israel are warned, and called on to worship and love God, though others will also be called. Yes, there will be a Judgement, but after the end of historical time, not before. Yes, Isaiah tells of the coming of the anointed one, the Messiah, although we can also see another.

Isaiah is credited by many with launching Judaism, a religion that almost appears distinct from the religion of the house of Israel. It could be argued that his divinely enjoined message implicitly recognised that the kingdoms of David and Solomon, Dawud and Suleyman, were the highest points that Israel would ever attain and that a different way of relating to God needed to be found. This way had to be one that could cope with the inevitable earthly punishments that were to follow, until such a time as a spiritual reformer would come to reform the house of Israel in the form of Jesus/‘Isa, and a spiritual and political reformer would come to all the nations, in the form of Muhammad. His coming is not only recorded in Isaiah, but elsewhere, as we shall see when we consider Muhammad later; but it is surely the book of Isaiah, more than any other, that accounts for what the Qur’an says about the Arabian Jews at the time of the Prophet:

And lo, it is in the Scriptures of the men of old. Is it not sufficient evidence for them that the learned of the Children of Israel recognise it? (26:196-7)

Despite the warnings of Isaiah and the example of the destruction of Israel by the Assyrians, the kings of Jerusalem and Judah still, according to the Bible, attempted to treat religion as a form of divinely-sanctioned nationalism,

doubtless encouraged by the perceived holiness of the city itself. They played the game of power politics to counter the power of Babylon, the new imperial threat in the region, allying themselves with other small states in the region as well as with Egypt.

Jeremiah spoke out against this, prophesying a terrible doom for Jerusalem and her people, with only one way to avoid it. In Chapter 24 he says exactly what this entails through comparing the people to two baskets of figs: the 'good figs' being exclusively those who submit to the Babylonians, and the 'evil figs' being those who do not. It was a message that was heartily rejected by both rulers and people: when King Jehoiakim heard these prophecies, he cut them up and burned them, forcing Jeremiah to flee in fear of his life. When, in 597 BCE, Jerusalem was surrendered to the Babylonians and the last King of Judah, Zedekiah, was appointed by the Babylonians themselves, still the nationalists plotted, and ten years after this the Babylonians could stand no more and destroyed the Temple. For his stance against his people's nationalism, his endless prophecies of doom and his counsel of submission both before the city's capture and after, Jeremiah was regarded as a traitor and a heretic. As Robert Davidson says: 'If the fall of Jerusalem had not vindicated his stance, we might be reading now, not the book of Jeremiah but the book of Hananiah or of some of the other prophets with whom Jeremiah clashed.' (*The Oxford Companion to the Bible.*)

Jeremiah is similar to Isaiah in many ways in his criticisms. Throughout his years as prophet he rails against the Jews' cry of 'I will not serve' (Jeremiah 2); he attacks the religious practice of cultic devotion to the high places and compares it to harlotry (a motif we have seen before). He cites the fate of Israel as being a result of doing the same (3:6-9), calling Israel and Judah 'treacherous sisters'. He also attacks the lewdness of the people ('neighing after his neighbour's wife'), thus prefiguring Ezekiel, and he talks of harlots again, but this time not as a metaphor but as a frank

description of the people's behaviour. Before the destruction he announces that 'a nation from afar' will come to destroy and desolate, but he always warns that it is not too late – God's favour could still be retained through returning to a submission to His laws. Then, in desperation, he announces that God has abandoned His 'beloved' ones, regarding them as strange to Him, like animals that have become as unconscious of their relationship to God, and hence their humanity, as the pagans around:

I have forsaken mine house, I have left mine heritage; I have given the dearly beloved of my soul into the hand of her enemies. Mine heritage is unto me as the lion in the forest; it crieth out against me: therefore have I hated it. Mine heritage is unto me as a speckled bird, the birds round about are against her; come ye, assemble all ye beasts of the field and devour.

(Jeremiah 12:7-9)

However, like both Isaiah before and Ezekiel after, he knows that the ears will not hear: 'Therefore thou shalt speak all these words unto them; but they will not hearken to thee: thou shalt also call unto them; but they will not answer thee.' (7:27)

Yet he perseveres, because it is God's will and God's message. What is offered, particularly after the destruction of Jerusalem, is a hope, not of a national Israel, but of something beyond. Jeremiah speaks of a new heart (31:31-34) that will replace the old (3:17). This is a prophecy that the New Testament will refer back to as justification for the Messiah in 1 Corinthians 11:25 and Hebrews 8:6-13. These glad tidings come after the fall of Jerusalem, after the lesson might be assumed to have been learned, at a time when Jeremiah has been allowed to remain and preach by the Babylonians. There will be a new covenant and the Jews will change: 'Deep within them I will plant my Law, writing it in their hearts;' (31:33) but not in Jeremiah's lifetime. Some

Christians see this as fulfilled in the life of Jesus, though the time reference could be more modern:

In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called the Lord Our Righteousness. Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that they shall no more say, The Lord liveth, that brought up the children of Israel out of Egypt; but, The Lord liveth, which brought up and led the seed of the house of Israel out of the north country, and from all countries whither I had driven them; and they shall dwell in their own land.

(Jeremiah 23:6-8)

This (perhaps) aside, the books of Jeremiah do not appear to be packed with allusions to anything specifically post-Jewish, unlike Isaiah. However, there is one telling reference to the region of Arabia:

For pass over the isles of Chittim, and see; and send unto Kedar, and consider diligently, and see if there be such a thing. Hath a nation changed *their* gods, which are yet no gods? But my people hath changed their glory for that which doth not profit.

(Jeremiah 2:10-11)

As we have seen previously, Kedar, as a son of Ishmael, is Arab and the flocks of Kedar would indeed be gathered. They had not changed their gods 'which are yet no gods' at this stage, but under Muhammad they would do so, offering instead their allegiance to the One God. In the time of Jeremiah, the Children of Israel seemed, spiritually speaking, to be heading in an entirely contrary direction.

While Jeremiah's place was in Jerusalem, Ezekiel's was in exile, and he thus offers another geographical perspective, though he was Jeremiah's contemporary. He was deported to Babylon in 598 BCE and, according to the opening verses of

the Book of Ezekiel, he received his calling as a prophet four years later. Many of the verses thereafter talk of the destruction of Israel and Judah that had already taken place. They aim to shake the Jews out of their complacency by causing Jerusalem 'to know her abominations' (Ezekiel 16:2) and to reject her false prophets who were prophesying peace and visions of peace when 'there is no peace' (Ezekiel 13:16).

One of the themes that arises in the course of the prophecies is what some commentators have called the contradiction between Ezekiel the champion of personal responsibility and Ezekiel the prophet of divine intervention. At one point he dismisses the proverb that says that the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge, saying that we are all responsible for our own salvation: 'The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father.' (Ezekiel 18:20)

Yet paradoxically, in a later verse he prophesies a change in heart that will mark a sea-change for the people of Israel, although it will be a change that is carried out by God: 'A new heart will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgements, and do them.' (Ezekiel 36:26-27)

In one of his most well-known visions, amid the desolation of exile, Ezekiel sees a vision of something like this happening. He is carried in the spirit of the Lord to a valley, which is full of dry bones. God speaks to him and says of the bones: 'Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live: And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live, and ye shall know that I am the Lord.' (Ezekiel 37:5-6) Afterwards, God tells him that the bones are the House of Israel and that God will restore them to the land with his spirit in them.

Though not named in the following, the description in the Qur'an of the vision of the destroyed town (Jerusalem)

and of God's powers of restoration are witnessed in the following verse and are believed by many commentators to refer to Ezekiel, or, as he is often known in Arabic, Dhu'l-Kifl:

Or consider the one who, when passing by a town which had fallen into ruins, said, 'How can God bring this town back to life after its death?' So God made him die for a hundred years, and then brought him back to life, and asked, 'How long have you been here?' He replied, 'I have been here for a day, or for some of the day.' He said, 'No, but you have been here for a hundred years. Look at your food and drink which have not rotted, and look at your donkey. And, that We may make thee a token unto mankind, look at the bones, how We arrange them and cover them with flesh!' And when this was shown to him, he said: 'I know now that God is able to do all things.'

(2:259)

Dhu'l-Kifl is referred to in the Qur'an as being a man of steadfastness, of patience and constancy, like Isma'il and Idris, and was admitted to God's mercy as one of the 'righteous' (21:85-86). Elsewhere he is named with Isma'il and al-Yasa' (Elisha) as one of the chosen (38:48).

In both Qur'an and Bible we see that one of Ezekiel's hallmarks is his patience. Christopher T. Begg in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* describes him as 'an outwardly stoical, highly self-controlled and somewhat passive personality', citing as an example God's command that he not grieve for his beloved wife when she died in the siege of Jerusalem. This implies that he might well have been due a long wait before he saw the change of heart that he had prophesied. If we consider what happened after the return from Babylon in 546 BCE, it does not seem to have wrought profound changes, and certainly not enough to justify itself as the fulfilment of the vision of the dry bones. If we interpret the

Qur'an's 'one hundred years' as a very, very long time, rather than as a literal hundred, we could assume the same and that the event hasn't happened even until now.

What did happen, though, was the physical restoration of Jerusalem and, to some extent, of Jewish power, after the return from exile in 539 BCE under Cyrus, king of Persia. God, though, was not 'sanctified in them in the sight of many nations' (39:27). Over the next 500 years or so, as a nation the Children of Israel ran the full gamut of politico-religious experiences. After the revolt of Judas Maccabeus, they achieved a brief period of independence from 142 to 104 BCE, which was followed by 40 years of civil war until the semi-welcome occupation by the Romans in 63 BCE. By this time a belief that the People were witnessing 'the End of Days' was understandably growing, and with it came the anticipation of the coming of the Messiah who would deliver them (as they seemed unable or un-destined to deliver themselves).

During all this time, the extensive rules and prohibitions that had been listed by Ezekiel in 18:5-9 were not honoured: keeping justice; obeying the law; not eating in the mountains nor worshipping idols; being sexually faithful and clean; being charitable; honouring debts and not taking interest on loans. The Great Hebrew Prophets offered solace and direction to some at least of the Children of Israel at, during and after their worst time—the time of destruction and exile. The Children of Israel were offered, or perhaps promised, a new heart: 'offered' if we regard these matters on the human plane, 'promised' if we see them on the level of the Divine. On the human (and collective) plane, they failed, and would be expelled a second time. On the Divine (and macrocosmic) plane, though, the promise was fulfilled: a Jew came who did have a new heart. And that was Jesus.