

Title: Assignment 1 – Short Essay 1 (1500 words)

In 1500 words, discuss the role of prophets in ONE of the following contexts:

- a. Pre-Exilic
- b. Exilic
- c. Post-Exilic

In your discussion highlight the prophets' theological and pastoral understanding of Yahweh, Israel and the nations.

Course: Introduction to the Old Testament

Lecturer: Dr Siew Woh

Student: Scott Thong Yu Yuen

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DECLARATION

I certify that this ASSIGNMENT is my own work. I have acknowledged all material and sources used in it, and that I have not plagiarised in part or whole the work of others without stating the references.

b. The role of prophets in the Exilic context – the prophets’ theological and pastoral understanding of YHWH, Israel and the nations

Introduction:

The conquest of Israel and Judah – and the exiling of their populaces – dealt a major psychological blow to the Jewish people. Within this period spanning the eighth, seventh and especially sixth centuries B.C.¹, several prophets delivered YHWH’s messages to the survivors – names such as Ezekiel and Jeremiah, and also Isaiah whose visions of the future address the exile and beyond².

These prophets ministered to the listeners in a myriad of ways, about which countless books have been written. This essay chooses to focus on one particular question: “How? How could El Shaddai – the Almighty who rules the whole universe – lose His nation and His people to the uncircumcised pagans?”

It is in this context of defeat and despair that YHWH sent prophets to correct the mistaken theological assumptions of the people – that simply being ‘the nation of God’ gave them license to sin with no repercussions (Jeremiah 7:4-10). Mixed together with the admonitions, the prophets also brought a pastoral message of hope in YHWH’s everlasting *chesed* – His ‘believing loyalty’³ or ‘pledged, unbreakable, covenant love and loyalty’⁴.

As in Heaven, So on Earth

In order to fully understand the worries of the exiles, we must grasp their mindset: “while the Bible was written for us, it wasn’t written to us... we can only accurately discern the message if we

¹ Holman Bible Editorial, *Holman Concise Bible Dictionary*, (TN/USA: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2011), Perlego Edition, Exile.

² Holman Bible Editorial, *Holman Concise Bible Dictionary*, Perlego Edition, Isaiah.

³ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham/USA: Lexham Press, 2015), 164, 170.

⁴ Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross* (IL/USA: Crossway Books, 2014), 58.

let them speak as they spoke.”⁵. To the conquered Jew, their national destruction was not just a physical defeat – it was a spiritual demolition. For the fate of a nation is tied to that of its god.

The concept of national, ethnic or territorial deities can be seen throughout most of human history – and the Jewish people were no different. Within the pages of the Bible, we see this territorial view reflected in the supernatural princes of Persia, Greece and the Jews (Daniel 10:13,20-21). There are also YHWH’s judgments pronounced upon the gods of Egypt (Exodus 12:12), and punishment upon gods (Jeremiah 46:25) or heavenly host (Isaiah 24:21-23 & 34:2-4) that are linked to earthly kings.

Paul repeatedly (Romans 8:38, 1 Corinthians 2:6-8, Ephesians 1:21 & 2:2 & 3:10 & 6:12, Colossians 1:16 & 2:10 & 2:15) refers to rulers, authorities and powers which are not *flesh and blood*, but *spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places* (Ephesians 6:12). Such terms are applied by the Septuagint to the aforementioned princes in Daniel^{6 7}, and are “used in both the New Testament and other Greek literature for *geographical domain rulership*”⁸. Elsewhere, Paul mentions demons (1 Corinthians 10:20) and the god of this world (2 Corinthians 4:4) as the powers behind pagan religions.

In the Torah we find that it was YHWH Himself who divided the nations at Babel (Genesis 11) and **allotted** them to spiritual rulers, except for Abraham’s line (Genesis 12):

*When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders/territories of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. But the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his **allotted heritage**. – Deuteronomy 32:8-9 (ESV⁹)*

This worldview was widely held. The Syrians had the notion that Israel’s god must be linked to the hills (1 Kings 20:23-30). The Cyrus Cylinder (which corroborates 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 and

⁵ Michael S. Heiser, *The Bible Unfiltered: Approaching Scripture on Its Own Terms* (Bellingham/USA: Faithlife Corporation, 2017), 19.

⁶ N.auth, “Interlinear Daniel 10:13”, *Study Bible* (accessed 17-Jul-2022): <https://studybible.info/interlinear/Daniel%2010:13>

⁷ N.auth, “Interlinear Daniel 10:20”, *Study Bible* (accessed 17-Jul-2022): <https://studybible.info/interlinear/Daniel%2010:20>

⁸ Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 121-123.

⁹ Michael S. Heiser, “Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God,” *LBTB Faculty Publications and Presentations* (2001), 52.

Ezra 1:1-4 & 6:1-5) describes Cyrus reversing the Babylonian transgression of kidnapping the gods away from their conquered nations¹⁰. As for the Greeks, Plato states in Critias:

In the days of old the gods had the whole earth distributed among them by **allotment** ... They all of them by just apportionment obtained what they wanted, and peopled their own districts ... Now different gods had their **allotments** in different places which they set in order.¹¹

This is why Paul in Athens could confidently cite the Biblical and Greek belief:

*And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined **allotted** periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place – Acts 17:26*

Within the framework of this worldview, the reason a nation fell is clear – the god or gods who rule the nation had been outmatched:

Has any of the gods of the nations ever delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivvah? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of the lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the LORD should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand? – 2 Kings 18:33-35

In the above case, YHWH decisively proved that He wasn't to be mocked by slaughtering the invading army. By the Assyrian commander's own criteria, YHWH had utterly defeated his king and gods. But if so, then what of the outcome of the later invasions of Jerusalem – where YHWH did *not*

¹⁰ Irving Finkel, "Translation of the text on the Cyrus Cylinder (archived)", *The British Museum* (accessed 17-Jul-2022): https://web.archive.org/web/20121221112524/http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/articles/c/cyrus_cylinder_-_translation.aspx

¹¹ Plato, "Critias", *The Internet Classics Archive* (accessed 17-Jul-2022): <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/critias.html>

seem to deliver Jerusalem out of the hand of the Babylonians? To the gloating conquerors over Israel and Judah, the god of the Jews had lost – they should just accept it and move on: “*Where is their God?*” (Psalm 79:10)

It was therefore one of the tasks of the prophets to set the theological record straight: Jerusalem hadn’t fallen because YHWH was in any way *beaten*. In truth, YHWH’s almighty presence didn’t protect the Temple because YHWH had withdrawn it (Jeremiah 10:18-19 & 11:23). YHWH’s shining face (Deuteronomy 6:22-27) was hidden from the wayward Jewish people (Jeremiah 39:23-24).

This had been forewarned by Moses – Israel was **allotted** to YHWH, and He would tolerate no disloyalty:

*It is because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt, and went and served other gods and worshiped them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not **allotted** to them. – Deuteronomy 29:18,25-26*

Yet this desolation of God’s promised land wouldn’t last forever – YHWH in His abounding *chesed* would cease this punishment after seventy years (Jeremiah 25:11-14 & 29:10, Ezekiel 11:17). And something even greater was to follow...

Conclusion

The Jewish people and nation had their foundation in the Exodus of Moses – the exile must have seemed to undo it all. For a little while, the nation of YHWH was trampled underfoot by their enemies (Isaiah 63:18, Daniel 8:13) and His holy name was belittled (Psalm 74:10 & 22, Psalm 79:12). But soon the Most High would judge not only the pagan nations, but also the spiritual forces behind them:

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment...

I said, "You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you;

nevertheless, like men you shall die, and fall like any prince." – Psalm 82:1 & 6-7

YHWH's hand cannot be stayed (Daniel 4:35), and He shall accomplish His purpose (Isaiah 46:10) by taking matters into His own, nail-pierced hands. He would lead a new and greater Exodus¹² to save His people out of captivity. He would overthrow the spiritual forces who led the surrounding nations astray (Matthew 8:28-29, Mark 1:23-24, Luke 8:26-29 & 11:20, 1 Corinthians 2:8 & 6:3, Ephesians 1:19-23 & 4:8, Colossians 2:10 & 15, Hebrews 2:14, 1 Peter 3:18-22). With all authority, He would establish the Kingdom of God (Matthew 28:18-20).

Whereas for a time Jacob was YHWH's portion (Deuteronomy 32:9), through Messiah – descendant of Jacob (Numbers 24:17) – He would fulfil His global promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:3 & 22:8). O people of God, hold fast to the promise: *Arise, O God, judge the earth; for you shall inherit all the nations!* – Psalm 82:8¹³

¹² Elaborated upon further in the 2022 essay submitted to Dr. Siew Woh: "How does the Pentateuch (Torah) form the foundation of the Old Testament? How does it relate to the New Testament?"

¹³ A clue that the above passage refers to the spiritual powers over nations is Psalm 82:8's 'inherit' [root word 'nachal'] also being used in Deuteronomy 32:8-9's inheritance/heritage. See Michael S. Heiser, "Should the Plural אֱלֹהִים of Psalm 82 Be Understood as Men or Divine Beings?" *Annual Meeting, Evangelical Theological Society (2010)*, 4-5. Available at: <http://www.thedivinecouncil.com/ETS2010Psalm82.pdf>

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