

When The Markers Are Moved

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As we draw near to the end of probably the most eventful and breathtaking half century in human history, and as the world braces itself for the exhilarating, but increasingly uncertain, pluralistic, post-modern era, it is natural that nations all over are preparing themselves for the great historical moment of transition into the new millennium. In times like these, on the one hand, there is a greater interest in history and traditions, in reaching back to the past for lessons and guidance about identity and values while moving into the uncertain future, and on the other, we are also seeing creative and inspired efforts to design and construct monumental structures or buildings to express mankind's hopes and dreams of the new millennium. When that historical midnight second is struck in less than three years from now, psychologically, a new era is deemed to have arrived and that "time" has moved qualitatively into another aeon. Whether one looks forward or not to that fateful moment depends on where one stands in life and the type of societies we find ourselves in now.

Our Dean of Studies, at the 49th Anniversary Service of the College last October said something to the effect that "when the clock strikes twelve, probably nothing very significant will happen, and life will continue as usual." I tend to agree with him, more so with the authority of the Preacher, that we ask whether in human affairs "are there anything really new under the sun?" Nonetheless, the question still remains, "usual" as to what? If the "usual" is what we are already experiencing in recent years—the many crises and confusion in political, economic, cultural, social, moral and ethical spheres, as well as the increasingly worrying

eco-environmental problems—then the “usual” cannot be considered or accepted as “normal”. For if so, the dawning of the new millennium will only accelerate or suck us further into the “black-hole” of uncharted treks.

We have resigned ourselves to the fact that advances in science and technology, informatics and multi-national trade, in a fast-shrinking global village driven by sheer market forces is a mixed blessing. Our problem is compounded by the increasing fragmentation and disintegration of the traditional social, cultural and moral values which have held human societies together in the past. With the accelerated changes familiar markers and brackets in life are being replaced. There is the fear that the ethos and culture of a postmodern world spurred on by the pervasive power of information technology beyond the control of any government could well unravel all the hard work of nation building. In that sense, “the millennium clock has struck and arrived much earlier”.

It is therefore not without grave concern that as we brace ourselves for the brave new world, overnight, our region is experiencing one of the most difficult periods in recent history, namely, the currency meltdown and economic crisis. For many years, Singapore has not experienced a situation like this—something quite out of its power to manage. Our natural limitations are already well known to all. But these recent events are showing up more of our inherent fragility and vulnerability: we are “at the mercy” of situations beyond our control.

In the ebb and flow of history and civilisations, it is inevitable that familiar markers of state, society and life, are changed, removed, or even destroyed, with new ones set up in their place. But there are times when the pace and nature of change are so fundamental that the experiences of the past that form the basis of overcoming adverse situations no longer hold good for the future.

On a broader front, if what the region is experiencing is anything to go by, then mankind and global society, have a lot of re-thinking and heart-searching to do about what the fundamentals and non-negotiables of life are. We need to face squarely this present crisis, as a serious “opportunity

in danger” (which is what the term in Chinese means), to critically reflect and hopefully raise ourselves above the framework of the conditional secular value system. Since the collapse of the communist system as a serious competitor for the minds of nations, the almost sole definition of a good government worthy of support is now more and more narrowly defined by the paramount concern of who can deliver more and better. The present crisis is severely testing this definition and linkage.¹

While no one wishes to be living in voluntary poverty, joblessness and hopelessness, any restructuring of society for the future which does not seriously take into account the more important issue, “what is man?” (Pss 8, 144) is fundamentally flawed. It would be a failure to recognise that the real problem is “not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but the hearing of the word of the Lord” (Am 8.11f.). The dictum that “man does not live by bread alone” (Dt 8.3; Mt 4.4) could not be more truly felt today than other times.

So, as our nation stands at the threshold of a new millennium, we are faced with challenges, problems, questions and crises, of a different nature, level and intensity. To make matters worse, most of these seem to be pulling in different directions. The solution of one problem creates others. It is no surprise that one of the most fundamental concerns of our nation is about the quality, character, integrity, commitment of our people to stand up and be counted. The United States will probably never have any problem to continue attracting the best talents from all parts of the world to infuse new and fresh impetus into its society for continuing development and growth. How we wish that that is so with our small nation state, but, alas, this is not to be! The worrying thing is the perpetual *conditionality* not only with new foreign talents but even our very own. We have been forewarned that for our small nation it will not only be a marathon race, but it is also an uphill climb which will get steeper along the way as others are also playing the game more seriously and even ruthlessly now. The pressures and demands on ourselves can only increase and not decrease.

The Challenge of our Christian Heritage – the Experience of the Exile (587 B.C.)

In times like this, while exemplary leadership is most crucial, it is far from adequate considering the challenges that we as a small nation will be facing at the turn of the millennium. Moreover, in an increasingly pluralistic world it is not easy for political and social visions, policies or exhortations to filter down and be universally accepted. Political, professional, scientific, technical and entrepreneurial elite are no doubt essential for Singapore to survive and stay ahead. But one must never forget about the people at large, the *poloi*, who are at the front line of daily living, maintaining the social, cultural, familial and moral values which hold society together. It is also essential for the well being of the nation that they are also convinced about the need to be committed to the state. They also need to be empowered or enabled to have clear vision and persuaded about the nation regardless of the circumstances. The challenge is to have one common set of values which can inspire and motivate the society to move together in the same direction.²

In many ways, with or without government, Christianity has always been part and parcel of and contributed significantly to, the development and building of this small city state from its earliest days. Whether the contributions have been adequately acknowledged or documented is another matter. Our concern as Christians and the church in this island state is: how do we look at ourselves and what have we to offer?

It has been noted by many that in the Old Testament faith and culture, be it the law, kingship, prophets, the psalms, and wisdom, a certain “democratisation” or “universalising” process had taken place in the course of its history, in the sense that whatever is expected of the king and the elite of society is also applicable in essence to the common Israelite. They are all ultimately “brothers”, equal and accountable before Yahweh, the only true sovereign Lord. The elite are not above the people who are brothers (Deut 17.14-20). If indeed there was such a universalising process, it would probably be truer to say that it was a rediscovery of what the whole people of God were meant to be when they were first constituted as “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” at Sinai (Ex 19-24). This was repeatedly reaffirmed on later occasions at critical

historical junctures (Josh 1, 5, 23, 24; 1 Sam 12; 2 Sam 5, 7; 1 Chron 29). Furthermore, this process took place because the leaders were seen as representatives of and responsible for the people of God. Hence, the scathing rebuke and judgement of leaders who failed to make themselves beyond reproach (Jer 23.1-6; Ezek 34; Ps 72).

This “democratisation” and “universalising” process and spirit of servant-leadership is perfected at the deepest level in the New Testament example of Jesus’ washing the feet of his disciples (Jn 13.12-17, see also Lk 12.48). It is also seen in his challenging and correcting the prevailing mindset of Jewish leaders when he said, “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve” (Mk 10.42-45). If such a process is deemed impracticable in the world, then let it be so. But this is our Christian heritage; it is a powerful source of strength and contribution to any society and state, especially at this critical hour when familiar and comfortable markers are being moved.

In the Old Testament, the people of God were confronted with a very critical test when practically all their familiar markers of faith and life, political, social and cultural were moved. In the great calamity of 587 B.C., the nation was overrun and the leaders of the nation were humiliatingly taken into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon.

Certain similarities between Judah then and Singapore now are almost uncanny. Being separated, since the mid 10th century B.C. almost immediately after Solomon’s reign, from its better endowed and bigger northern neighbour, Judah had always been under political, military and economic pressures from the countries around. She was almost always at the mercy of political and economic power play in the region. Geopolitically, it had not been easy for her to survive as a nation for so long. Yet it outlasted Israel by almost two centuries. However, the buffer which she enjoyed from the political and cultural forces of the Phoenicians, the Arameans and the Assyrians when Israel was still to its north was also removed. Judah was now directly exposed and vulnerable to external and internal pressures. Internally, the nation continued to

deviate from its covenant faith and culture even after King Hezekiah's reforms a century earlier. Externally, Judah was caught up in the changing international power configuration of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. Finally, the walls of Jerusalem was breached in 587 B.C. and the leaders of the nation taken into exile.

The destruction of Jerusalem and the subsequent exile mark the great watershed of Israel's history.... The marvel is that her history did not end altogether. Nevertheless, Israel both survived the calamity and, forming a new community out of the wreckage of the old, resumed her life as a people.³

In Babylon, many of the familiar markers of their nation and history, their life and faith, cultural and social, were not only gone, the Israelites were confronted with the glorious magnificence of the social, cultural, religious and economic life of the mighty Babylonian empire, best exemplified in its famous capital city. The inherited centuries-old belief that they were the special covenanted people of Yahweh who received the almost unconditional promises to King David of an everlasting dynasty (2 Sam 7), symbolised by the majestic, immovable temple on Mount Zion, was seriously called into question for the first time. Both national and religious ideologies have collapsed under pagan power. The temptation to give up on the ancestral faith and turn their backs on their religious and cultural identity was acutely felt.

When one considers the magnitude of the calamity that overtook her, one marvels that Israel was not sucked down into the vortex of history along with the other little nations of western Asia, to lose forever her identity as a people...⁴

From a cultural-historical or cultural-anthropological perspective, it would not only be interesting, but also crucial, to know how and why. The matter could not be more starkly put, "(Israel) had to clarify its position vis-à-vis the great nations and their gods, vis-à-vis the national tragedy and its meaning—or perish."⁵ Its few remaining leaders and elite were carried into exile and the homeland was left with the poor and less able. "But these exiles, though few in number, were the ones who would

shape Israel's future, both giving to her faith its new direction and providing the impulse for the ultimate restoration of the Jewish community in Palestine."⁶

In fact, far from being defeated and disillusioned, the 6th century BC (the exilic period) turned out to be the most "creative" period in the faith and life of the Israelites.⁷ How did Israel interpret and clarify its situation in the exile vis-à-vis the promises of its traditional and covenantal faith? It will be most instructive for our purpose to understand how Israel responded to and in the Exile, when the familiar markers of life and faith were moved.

And if one asks why she was not [sucked down], the answer surely lies in her faith: the faith that called her into being in the first place proved sufficient even for this. Yet this answer is not to be given glibly, for the exile tested Israel's faith to the utmost. That is won through not something that transpired automatically, but only with much heart-searching and after profound readjustment.⁸

To answer this, we will highlight below only a few areas characterising the theological thought of the period for discussion. I believe the three-fold canon of the OT, namely, the Law, the Prophets and the Writings, gives us an important clue to the process by which the Israelites responded theologically, whether consciously or unconsciously, to the disintegrating forces which challenged the validity of their faith and culture, their destiny and identity. But first, a few points of qualifications. First, we are not saying that the three-fold canon of the OT was consciously composed or structured in that sequence to answer to the questions posed above. Second, we are not saying that the composition process in these areas of thought had all reached their final stages at this time, except to say that these characteristic thoughts either already existed or were just fermenting and shaping the Jewish minds during this period. Third, while we are not exactly clear about the composition process, the literary evidences of the period arguably is a good indication of the existence of such formative thoughts and

emphases. Fourth, there was a gap between those whose convictions are reflected in these literature and the majority of the population.

The Exile turned out to be fundamentally decisive of a renewed identity, rediscovered destiny and mission of the Israelites in the midst of overwhelming odds. Under normal circumstances lesser peoples and civilisations would have been swept off the face of the earth. The Exile was no accident. Already on the eve of the watershed experience, there were prophetic voices calling Israel to face the fundamental problems relating to her own life and faith as the way for her to face her external problems and pressures.

Rediscovering the Fundamentals: The Torah

While the details are obscure, what emerged from the exile, as far as we know, is that Israel now defined its national-cultic identity more and more by the covenant law and tradition. Israel found out in its exile that it was a nation not because of its kingship, politics, economics or race and culture, but, first and foremost, because of Yahweh's redeeming them from Egypt and calling them into a special covenant existence at Sinai. The sense of being the people of Yahweh was initially actualised during the wilderness wandering period (Eze. 16:59-63; 34-36; cf. Ex. 3:13-18, 6:1-8, 19:19-24; Deut 6:4-25; Hos 11:1). This going back to the roots was the essential element in their self-reflection and self-understanding which enabled Israel not only to survive the Exile but to emerge stronger and clearer in their self-identity.

It is in this light that we should understand and appreciate the importance of the emphasis on the covenant law and tradition amongst the exiled Jews, as evidenced by the importance given to them in the days after the return to their homeland (Ezra 1-3, 5-6, 7-10; Neh 8-10). Sabbath and circumcision, in particular, both ancient institutions, were stressed and practised in the exile as never before. They were considered as tests and marks of commitment and obedience to the covenant, the means whereby the Jews in exile were now able to demonstrate their rediscovered faith even though the markers of Temple, sacrifices and festivals were gone. These were "new" markers, so to speak. In this way, the exiles were probably more "genuine" compared with those before the exile who

physically lived in the land but were complacent in their observance of the covenant stipulations. Lest we belittle these as external formalities, we should not forget the not insignificant sacrifices these Jewish exiles had to make in order to observe and practice their laws (Dan 1, 3). They were new markers for life which gave definition and sustain them in a rootless world.

The Mosaic heritage expressed in particular through the Torah challenged the Israelites in exile in the most fundamental way as they stood at the crossroads facing a disintegrating situation (Ezek 3, 11). The stripping away of the worn-out markers of nationhood and ethnicity, of linking economic well being and faith, was never easy and almost unthinkable in practical terms. Though disconcerting, this stripping away was for the exiles not totally undesirable. For it led to the re-discovery their covenant markers.

The Torah subsequently became the focus of the post-exilic community, the means by which they were held together in an environment where all the previous markers in the golden days of the 10th Century the Davidic Kingdom were not to be seen again. In fact, the sense of the Israelites' commitment to their land and nation after the Exile was even stronger because of their rediscovered identity as the people of God with a special destiny and mission. Even though their forefathers' land lay in ruins and disrepair and Persia was definitely a more viable place for survival, yet they deliberately chose to return and rebuild the temple and the nation (2 Chr. 36:22f.; Haggai & Zechariah; Ezra 1-3, 5-6, 7-10; Neh 8-10).

For the Jews, it was back to the fundamentals of the covenant when the markers of faith and culture were moved during the exile. For moderns, it is not only a matter of back to fundamentals. Rather, it is whether the fundamentals are genuine and will enable a society to continue its existence intact and pursue its destiny against the winds and tides of change, especially when the coming millennium is so open-ended!

Recalling the Past, Renewal for Present & Future: Prophetic History

It is not without significance that the second part of the OT Canon is the Prophets, more specifically the historical former prophets and the

personalised latter prophets. Both parts are firmly anchored in history. There is purportedly a great historical corpus, the Deuteronomic history, spanning the book of Deuteronomy or Joshua, Judges, the Books of Samuel and the Kings. When it was composed and edited and whether there is a great corpus or individual books are not our concern here. It is generally agreed that in its final form it reflects the exilic period when Jewish existence faced one of its most difficult questionings and challenges. Mosaic covenant thought certainly underlies these historical literature as a theological principle, explicated in the book of Deuteronomy. Primarily to recall the original destiny of Israel's past with the purpose of demonstrating that the exile actually vindicated Yahweh's sovereignty and judgement, while showing up the repeated failures of Israel in their relation to God throughout its history.

This arguably was another avenue the Israelites coped with the disintegrating environment in the exile, by reflecting on their past history and traditions and the calamity that had befallen them. The result of this process of self-criticism actually prepared and enabled them to face up to their present situation. It led them not to questioning the power and covenant commitment of Yahweh, but to repentance and renewed commitment to live up to the original covenant calling and ideals. With the Prophets history was integrated, resulting in a unique composition of prophetic history of a special covenant quality which has the capacity to recall, reveal, rebuke, speak, and challenge, and to call the people back to the "path of life" (Deut. 27-32; Josh. 1:24; Judg. 2; 1 Sam. 12; 2 Sam. 7; 1 Kgs. 18; 2 Kgs. 17).

Having recalled the special characteristics of their history, and hence identity and destiny, instead of despair and disintegrating, the Israelites in exile were now imbued with a conviction and a depth of historical perspective that belie their political stripping and vulnerable position in the exile. This prophetic historical perspective gave the Israelites the courage and confidence to persevere. It was like an anchor and guiding light when confusion and shaking of confidence set in (Isa 40.1-31, esp. 27; Pss 105 and 106). More than that, it enabled them to discern between the essentials and non-essentials as far as survival is concerned. In their recalled history, it is the Word of God which calls and initiates

the history of Israel from the patriarchs onwards. It was especially so in the time of Moses, Joshua, and Samuel, during whose time and ministry internal tensions in the society brought forth the institution of the monarchy.

Subsequently, particularly in the mid-8th Century B.C., there was a marked shift in emphasis when individual prophets, as spokesmen of Yahweh and as conscience of the Mosaic covenant and the people, came more and more into the forefront of society to interpret and apply the terms of the covenant to the life of the nation, its kings and people. This unique prophetic historical literature of Israel came about not only because of the re-discovered centrality of the core belief and values of the Mosaic covenant but is also due to the emergence of the prophets as conscience against the kingship throughout its history. The prophets who were often critical of the kingship were probably more committed than the kings to the genuine well being of the nation and its institutions which find their constitution in the Mosaic covenant. "For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, 'In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength'" (Isa 30.15; cf. 40.6-8, 55.10f.). Israel was challenged by Jeremiah, on the very eve of their going into exile to "Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls" (6:16; 31:21).

As the prophets were essentially upholders of the covenantal sovereignty of Yahweh over his people, Israel would henceforth be able to have a moral law to guide, shape and correct, which is above any secular power or material incentive. It provides her with the values and culture based on God's will, grace and righteousness. The law is life itself! Isa. 2:3f. and Mic. 4:1-4 echo the essence of Deut 32:45-47, "Lay to heart all the words which I enjoin upon you this day, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. For it is no trifle for you, but it is your life." In the more personalised prophetic literature, Israel was made aware of the high moral dimension of living which is the test of true religion and faith. It would have been most easy in times of turmoil and deprivation to sit loose to both personal and corporate ethics (Isa 5). Yahweh their God is not only a God of

grace, blessings and promises, but is also holy, righteous and just, defender of the "poor, widows, orphans and sojourners". While material improvement is certainly an indication of God's blessings, the prophets never allowed the boundless pursuit of wealth at the expense of these "underclass" (Amos 2:6, 3:15, 14.1, 4f., 4:10-13, 5:21-24, 6:1-8; Isa 5:7-12, 18-23).

In extension of this covenant sentiment, the prophetic literature also shows that the horizon of the Israelites cannot stop at their own ethnic or cultural boundary. The tremendous covenant promises and blessings which came with the special calling and destiny of the Israelites at Sinai were never meant to be enjoyed by themselves alone. Rather, they were to be a blessing to the nations as seen especially in the Servant Songs (Isa 2:2-4, 11.1-16, 42:1-9, 49:6,8, 55:1-5). This prophetic perspective was an essential ingredient in the faith and life of the Israelites if they were to be a blessing to the nations. Though the returning Jews and their descendants continued to find great difficulty in living up to this prophetic vision of the Servant of Yahweh, it does not negate the fact that this higher prophetic vision remained with the Israelites. As time went by, this heightened vision of Israel's destiny would be projected into the future as a vision of hope beyond the exile, as its real fulfilment is only in the perfection of time.

Finally, the prophets during the exile pushed the horizons of Israel's perspective back to creation. This was essential if the Israelites, under pressure, were to have the widest possible view of life. The historical sense of life inevitably has its ups and downs, the latter especially in view of the Exile. Isaiah presented a *tour de force* of creation theology, so to speak, not only to quiet the doubts of the Israelites but more so to instil faith and hope in Yahweh's covenant steadfast love so that Israel in turn will remain steadfast (40:12-31, 48:12-16, 54:9-10; cf. Job 38:42.6). Again, in order to confirm to the exiles the light at the end of the tunnel and that David would continue to have descendants on his throne, the covenant with day and night and the ordinances of heaven and earth was invoked to build faith in Yahweh as the Lord of history (Jer. 33:19-25; Ezek. 34-37). Israel was given new markers to live by.

Gracious Living of the Soul: the Liturgical and Poetic Psalter

Israel's life during the exile was no bare existence. From all accounts, it is generally agreed that it was during this time that one of the greatest literary works of the ancients was compiled and edited. Anyone who has come across the Book of Psalms could not but be impressed by the magnificent coverage of practically all aspects of life in all possible circumstances: joy and lament, blessings and want, physical and metaphysical states of existence, individual or corporate living. The 150 psalms are a source of endless marvels. There probably won't be a more beautiful and succinct way of introducing the Psalter than the meditation of Ps. 1. Ps 8 most ably juxtaposes two paradoxical perspectives of God's creature, man: his capacity for reaching for the heights while humbly acknowledging the source of his own greatness. The evergreen beauty and depth of truth in Ps. 23 have captivated both the old and the young, the delicate and the tough, alike. Ps. 90 depicts the ability to hold in tension the fleetingness of earthly life and the hope of eternal life by a man who is at once fragile and mortal, yet exudes such wisdom which comes only from a life rich in encounters with both the divine and mundane. The incredible skill and ability to work out the fundamental principles of life around the law of Yahweh through the Hebraic educational acronymic device as in Ps 119 can only come from a people filled with accumulated wisdom through life's journey because they had their focus on the ultimate concern.

The Psalter skilfully integrates both the divinely ordained Torah and the Davidic kingship (which during the monarchy was often pitted against one and another) to realise the blessings promised within the covenant. It helps us to see that the Davidic king was meant to be the example par excellence of one living under the covenant; he is a sign and channel on earth of the one true God (Pss. 72, 89).

These religious and life-embracing Psalms became for the Israelites a most effective expression of genuine and courageous living in exile. They plumb the depths and scale the heights to show us what life under the covenant could still be when the markers of life are moved. They also mirror life superficiality creating in us a certain godly restlessness to overcome our complacency and pride. When the people of God come

together to meet with their God or worship privately, their minds and hearts, visions and sentiments, were liturgically shaped and moulded into an eternal desire of the holy and gracious God ("as the deer panteth after the waters", Ps 42:1 cf. 119) or into an inner constraint not to give up even when life is difficult (Pss. 37, 73, 137).

What was it in such a people that in the midst of severe adversities, they were able to rise above the mundane and produce such immortal poetry? It was surely not due to some abstract, shadowy feelings about the divine as is the case with many forms of spirituality today. Rather, it was the rediscovered Torah faith and the firm confidence in Yahweh's sovereignty and presence with His people as seen in the historical prophetic literature. These experiences in the Psalter took on a life and authority which transcend culture and race, and continue to shape life and faith of God's people. No wonder, in the wisdom of the church, the Psalter is read still every morning and evening on a monthly, or even weekly, basis. It continues to infuse its quiet, pervasive spirit into the rhythm of one's life, into the conscious and unconscious thoughts and motions, and flows back into the life of the Torah and back to God (Ps. 1; Deut 32:46f.).

Determination to Live Wisely: The Fear of the Lord

During the exile, the Israelites were confronted with a different set of realities. Living in a foreign land with its different political and religious system, culture and values, is never easy for the Israelites who wanted to maintain their distinctiveness. The difficult choices and decisions that Daniel and his friends had to make show this up most strikingly (Chs 1, 3; Esther). It is therefore not surprising that wisdom thinking flourished during this period as the Jews needed the special wisdom, insight and wit to know how to survive in a religiously and culturally different and sometimes hostile world. Wisdom thought in the exile essentially expresses the will, courage and determination of the Jews not only to survive but to live successfully and wisely in a foreign land. To be pragmatic and realistic does not necessarily mean giving up their forefather's faith and values. Opting out by default would have been the easiest, but covenantally irresponsible, choice.

The ability to integrate and make sense of life's ups and downs in the framework of covenantal faith and express it in wisdom thought is another genius of the Israelites. Hence, the theological introduction to the Book of Proverbs reveals an inclusive framework in which "the fear of the Lord", a central covenant element (Deut. 4:5-8, 10:12, 31:13, cf. 28:58; Josh 24:14; Mic. 6:8) was the key to real wisdom (Prov. 1:4; 9:8).⁹ It is significant that Wisdom thought and the Psalter are integrated through the common Torah, especially the *Shema*, as can be seen in the exhortation "My son, keep your father's commandment, and forsake not your mother's teaching. Bind them upon your heart always; tie them about your neck. When you walk, they will lead you; when you lie down, they will watch over you. For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life" (Prov. 6:20-23 cf. Deut. 6:4-9, 11:18-21; Ps. 119:105).

The wisdom way of life was developed by force of circumstance: the constant need to decide between the two ways of loyalty or apostasy to the Torah and forefathers, of life and death, of light and darkness (Prov. 9). It was a choice which only "fools" ignored or denied. In order to make the right choice and succeed, the basic principles enunciated in a theologically structured introduction (Prov 1-9) is essential. The importance of family education in faith and values which are to shape the living ethos of the Israelites is most clearly seen in Proverbs. This duty is never simply passed on or over by the parents to children. "Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and reject not your mother's teaching; for they are a fair garland for your head, and pendants for your neck" (Prov. 1:8f.). It has also been recognised that Wisdom thinking significantly permeates the Psalter in at least a structural sense when the curtain was pulled down on the monarchy creating a crisis of continuity of the eternal covenant promises to David. (Pss. 89 and 90, 107)¹⁰

Even though circumstances were often difficult and unfriendly for any practising Jew during the exile, they did not deter them from squarely confronting life. These did not give in to paralysis or abdication of responsibility to live and choose wisely according to God's will. This requires great courage and conviction about life and faith which can come only when one is fully convinced about the Torah, the faith of one's

forefathers as well as God's sovereign presence and special calling to the people.

To sum up, what can we say about the people of Israel as presented above in their most difficult period in their history, the exile, when their familiar markers are moved?

The areas highlighted above for discussion are not haphazardly selected. The core of all these was the rediscovery of the covenant faith as the basis of Israel's existence and destiny. This covenant was best seen through the concrete salvation history stories narrated in the historical corpus of the Deuteronomic history coupled with the prophets who were the spokesmen for and upholders of the covenant sovereignty of Yahweh in relation to society. The interlocking of covenant law, history and prophets is what gives strength and cohesiveness to the faith and life to Israel. This integrated view of faith and prophetic history gave rise to courageous living. It enabled the Israelites to rise to great spiritual heights like a soaring eagle and go down into the darkest pit and long dark nights as seen in their poetry (the Psalter). It also enabled them to constantly come back to the harsh realities of practical living (Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes) where hard decisions had to be taken even when no real options were available except that of relying on the "fear of the Lord".

When the markers for Israel were moved, Israel came through the baptism of fire leaner but stronger. As mentioned before, while we are not too clear about the how she did it, what is clear from the preceding is that they have given us a picture of their new existence, the layout and design of their new "garden and home", so to speak. Through these windows we are able to see how Israel restructured and repositioned herself to move into the future. In many ways, she is now more capable of rising above changing circumstances and going beyond the limits of race and geography. This is due in no small way to the prophetic interpretation and application of the Torah faith and history. She is set free in that her values and basis for living are now different from the winds of change of the world. She now has the inner faith resources as well as the universal horizons to steady her in her pilgrimage of life with all its ebbs and flows. In fact, it might even be said that if her old

markers had not been moved, Israel might not have been able to survive, let alone continue to exist. But with the counter-points of covenant and creation, Israel developed new markers which were firmly rooted in historical existence which enabled her to maintain hope and confidence in all circumstances.

As our small island state stands at the cross roads of time and significant historical events, the Christian heritage which grew out of the historical experience of Israel has a lot to offer for the future. Only the strong can stomach it. But the good news is that it is the weak who are made strong, while those who considered themselves strong will be humbled.

Notes

- 1 Koh Buck Song, "What if more good years turn to more hard years?" *Straits Times*, 15 Aug 98, p. 56.
- 2 Koh Buck Song, "Helicopter vision can crash," *Straits Times*, 18 Aug 98, p. 4.
- 3 John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), p. 343.
- 4 John Bright, *op. cit.*, p. 347.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 348.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 345.
- 7 D Winton Thomas, "The Sixth Century BC: A Creative Epoch in the History of Israel," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 6 (1961), pp. 33-46.
- 8 John Bright, *op. cit.*, p. 347. Cf. p. 343: "Her faith, disciplined and strengthened, likewise survived and gradually found the direction that would follow through all the centuries to come."
- 9 Henri Blocher, "The Fear of the Lord as the 'Principle' of Wisdom", *Tyndale Bulletin* 28 (1977), pp. 3-28.
- 10 Gerald H Wilson, "Shaping the Psalter: A consideration of editorial linkage in the Book of Psalms" in J.C. McCann, Jr. ed., *The Shape and Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter*. JSOT 159 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 72-82.