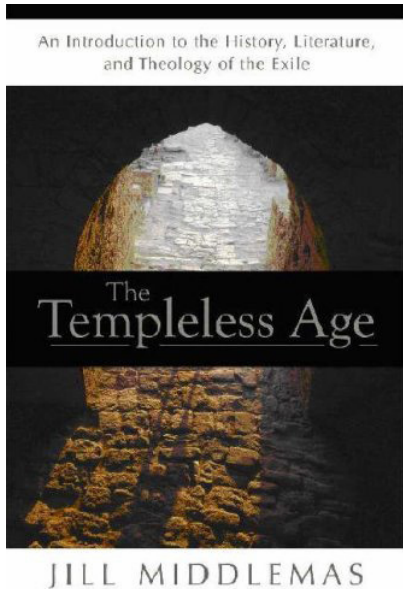


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Middlemas, Jill

***The Templeless Age: An Introduction to the History,
Literature, and Theology of the Exile***

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007. Pp. x + 174.
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Dr. Middlemas, who is now Associate Professor in the Department of Biblical Studies, Faculty of Theology, at the University of Aarhus, has continued her work on the “templeless age,” the period from the fall of the Jerusalem temple in 587–586 B.C.E. to the beginning of Persian rule. Her aim is to provide an up-to-date introduction to historical, literary, and theological insights on this important period in the history of ancient Israel. After an introduction, the first chapter focuses on giving an overview of the history. Five chapters are devoted to the “thought” of this period, by which is clearly meant the theological literature of that time that has been preserved, followed by brief conclusions. There is an extensive bibliography for each chapter, mostly in English, but with some works in German and French.

The chapter on history may be brief, but it provides a commendable précis of the main issues and can be recommended as a reliable overview of the period from the destruction of the temple to its rebuilding. It is up-to-date and, with the bibliography, will provide an important initial encounter with the history of the period. The only quibble is whether the archaeology really shows a population shift to Jerusalem at the end of the sixth century, corresponding to a return of settlers from Babylon. According to Oded Lipschits (*The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem: Judah under Babylonian Rule* [Winona Lake, Ind.:

Eisenbrauns, 2005], 267–71), there is indeed a renewed settlement—quite small—in Jerusalem at end of the sixth or beginning of the fifth century B.C.E., but “the ‘return to Zion’ left no archaeological evidence,” and “there is no indication whatsoever of either a population increase or any change in settlement pattern, apart from the renewal of settlement in Jerusalem and its environs” (271). This was one reason why the date of 515 B.C.E. for the completion of the Second Temple (based on Ezra 6:15) seems unrealistic.

The “thought” of the period is arranged in five themes, relating to the various reactions to the effects of the temple’s destruction. Chapter 2 looks at the first reaction to the aftermath of the disaster: mourning that manifests itself in the form of lamentation in various biblical writings (Lamentations; Pss 74; 79; 89; 102, 106, 137; Isa 63–64). The next chapter looks at the second reaction to the aftermath of disaster: memory. This takes the form of historiography, primarily the Deuteronomistic History, which remembers suffering and expresses despair but also shows belief in the deity’s power to intervene in human affairs. Chapter 4 considers the vacillation between judgment and hope: books such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel both pronounced doom on Judah in no uncertain terms, but both contain passages that show hope beyond the disaster. The next two chapters both talk of the “turn to hope”: chapter 5 addresses this turn to hope via prophetic visions of divine reversal, such as are found in Isa 40–55 and Ezek 40–48. The “turn to hope II,” found in chapter 6, focuses on God’s commitment to his covenant. The writings of Haggai, Zech 1–8, and the Holiness Code show the conviction that Yahweh is bringing salvation to the people.

The writings, and their theology, surveyed here show an attempt to create meaning out of the destruction of 587/586 B.C.E. These show a variety of genres—prayer, historiography, law, and prophecy—that employ a number of strategies: communication (via liturgy, lament, and prayer as an expression of grief); creativity (by bringing together separate traditions, such as myth, history, and election traditions, to produce new meanings); adaptation (by updating and editing the literature as circumstances changed over time); inheritance (all the literature of this period drew on earlier traditions to give new visions); and inclusion (with a number of perspectives sitting together even when championing quite different understandings of how to respond).

This lengthy survey of the theology or “thought” of the period brings up an important methodological question: to what extent can one characterize the thought of a period by investigating its literature. This has recently been discussed in relation to the work of Peter Ackroyd, in a volume to which Middlemas herself has contributed (see G. N. Knoppers, L. L. Grabbe, and D. N. Fulton, eds., *Exile and Restoration Revisited: Essays on the Neo-Babylonian and Persian Periods in Memory of Peter R. Ackroyd* [LSTPS; London: T&T Clark, forthcoming]). The theological literature investigated here, of course, tells us

something about what *some* people were thinking, but it is far from certain that this literature can be said to characterize the thought of the Jewish population at this time in its major outlines. Just as the literature can hardly be taken at face value to represent the history of the period, so it also cannot be taken to give a nuanced view of the thought. Granted, this literature shows a range of views and reactions to the events of the fall of Jerusalem, the exile of some of the population, and the traumas of trying to make a life in the Babylonian region. Middlemas has shown some of the themes that exercised some of those who looked at things from a theological perspective, but what portion of the population did this? Were not most Judeans absorbed in the daily struggle to make a living from the land? In all our understandable and appropriate concern for the theology of the literature from this age, we need to keep this in mind.

It may seem churlish to bring up the main title of the book, but the author actually makes a point of it; indeed, it expresses the second of the two purposes of the book: “In the second place, it [the book] takes seriously concerns raised about the designation of the period following the collapse of Jerusalem in 587 BCE as the ‘exile’” (ix). She is certainly correct that the term “exile” has problems with it, since most scholars now acknowledge that most Jews were not deported from Palestine to Mesopotamia. There was thus no exile in the conventional sense. The question is whether “templeless age” is the term to replace it. “Neo-Babylonian” is a useful term, but it covers a slightly different period of time. “The templeless age” more closely corresponds to the traditional “exilic” period, which better fits with the history of Judah, though some may balk at the implicit overlap with the beginning of Persian rule, since the temple was only built some decades after Cyrus took Babylon. Yet these terms catch on for often undefined reasons; it remains to be seen whether other scholars develop an affection for it.

This is a useful introduction to the period covered, especially in being aimed at a wider audience. It covers the topics that most will be interested in. It must be said that there is at present few introductions specifically on this period, although a number are available that include both the “exilic” and the “Persian period.” Among other attractions, it is a handy size and should make an ideal student text in its content and format.