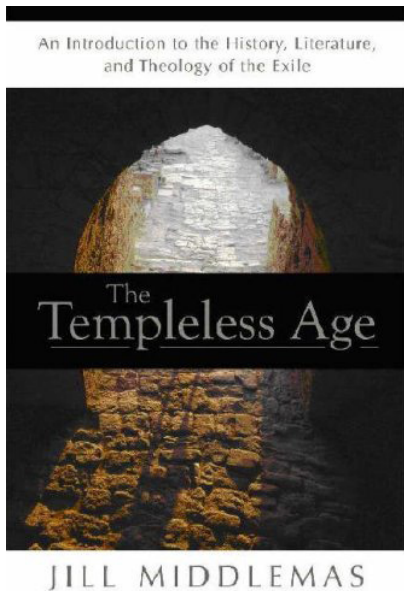


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Middlemas, Jill

***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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This is a helpful, short introduction to a corpus of biblical texts dealing with the biblical period between the destruction of the first Yahweh temple in Jerusalem and the construction of the Second Temple. The book presents a synthesis of scholarship in the classic historical-critical tradition, so the Bible's literary worlds are associated with events in the real world within a time frame defined by the years 587 and 515 B.C.E. Apart from the preface, an introduction, a chapter on "the historical record," and a conclusion, there are five sections on three main categories of literature reflecting on the course of events during these seventy-two years: literature lacking a future vision (laments and the Deuteronomistic History); literature characterized by the intermingling of judgment and hope (Jeremiah and Ezekiel); and literature exemplifying a turn to hope (Deutero-Isaiah, Ezek 40–48, Haggai, Proto-Zechariah, and the Holiness Code) (7–8, 27). In spite of its limited size, the book is comprehensive and very well arranged, and it has a number of extensive bibliographies mostly referring to works in the conventional historical-critical tradition. It is a study of a literary world founded on the idea of the exile, but the author insists that she is dealing with historical events for which the Bible is among the most important sources. Jill Middlemas writes within a well-established historical-critical tradition of vicious circles: biblical texts are interpreted in the light of historical events that are mostly reconstructed from the same biblical texts.

The purpose of the book is twofold, as the author intends to provide “an up-to-date introduction to historical, literary, and theological insights on an important period in the history of ancient Israel” as well as to take “seriously concerns raised about the designation of the period following the collapse of Jerusalem in 587 BCE as the ‘exile’” (ix). Jill Middlemas’s solution to the said “concerns” is confusing, as she proposes to name the era in question “templeless” instead of the designation she denounces. What would be the proper designation of the age ushered in by the collapse in 70 C.E. if not “templeless” as well? “The templeless age 2.0,” perhaps? The author emphasizes that her term “points to the period between the two temples” (ix). A more precise designation of this part of biblical history would be “the idea of a templeless age in ancient Israel.”

The introduction is a paraphrase of the biblical story and the Persian propaganda known from texts such as the Cyrus Cylinder that the compulsory transfer of populations in the ancient Near East was actually a repatriation of exiles (1–2), without giving thought to the fact that an ethnic continuum between the groups of people relocated from Judah to Mesopotamia by the Babylonians and the people relocated from Mesopotamia to Judah by the Persians is actually very far from being a matter of course. Attention is drawn to different ideologies “in the religious thought of ancient Israel” (2). These ideologies are attributed to different periods (2–3). There is no mention of the possibility that different ways of thinking could exist simultaneously and perhaps reflect contemporary discussions between different schools of thought.

Chapter 1, “The Historical Record,” contains a brief discussion of some of the problems involved when trying to assess the history of the Israelite/Jewish communities in Judah, Mesopotamia, and Egypt when Judah was under Babylonian rule. The author is fully aware that during the last two or three decades the biblical perspective has been challenged “as ideologically rather than factually based” by important studies and therefore “appeals have been made to archaeological evidence and imperial ruling strategies.” However, such evidence yields “a relatively skeletal portrait of sixth-century Judah” and does not provide “complete and incontrovertible details for the period under question” (9). The biblical texts “alone provide details about a people and a place with which we are concerned” (10). It naturally follows that the contents of the same texts cannot be verified by independent sources, which should infuse us all with the greatest caution when trying to use biblical texts as religio-historical sources for the periods they apparently describe.

In an “Overview of the templeless age (587–515 BCE)” (10–15) Middlemas demonstrates her conventional method of combining extrabiblical and biblical sources. The Bible is paraphrased and, where possible, corrected in the light of the extra written and archaeological sources we possess. Different assessments of the community at the close of

the sixth century B.C.E. are quoted: “an integrated community drawing on its past traditions to reformulate its identity as Yahweh’s people” (Peter Bedford) contrasted with “the standard view” that there was a conflict between the nonrepatriated community and the returnees (Oded Lipschits) and that early attempts were made to forge a unified identity (Yair Hoffman) (14). There is probably no methodically sound way to choose between such scenarios, as both represent possible readings of the biblical texts. However, when material evidence is adduced, serious doubts can be cast on the biblical picture. Middlemas knows of such challenges to the traditional rationalistic paraphrases of the Bible (she cites Diana Edelman) but deliberately chooses to ignore them: “for the purposes of this study, the biblical understanding of history provides a plausible time frame for the templeless age” (15).

Sketches of Israelite/Jewish communities in Judah and in the Diaspora (Egypt and Babylon) during “the templeless age” conclude the historiographical chapter (16–26). Again, the Bible is the main source, and Middlemas’s conservative readings and datings of biblical texts cause a number of puzzling statements. For instance, she wonders why no “Hebrew Scriptures” were found among the Elephantine documents (20). In another context she seems to accept the hypothesis that Asherah was a consort of Yahweh and states that her worship “was accepted for a time in the Jerusalem temple” (21), but it is not clear exactly what Middlemas has in mind. Was there a time before “the templeless age” when Asherah was not accepted? If so, when was that? Middlemas seems to prefer the Bible’s scheme of things in favor of archaeological evidence. The loss of the temple even gives rise to “a shift in thought toward personal piety” (26); does she really mean to say that piety did not exist before “the templeless age”? If so, how can she possibly know?

The bulk of the book consists of readings of different types of biblical literature centered on what could preferably be called the idea of the templeless age. These readings are most illuminating and demonstrate that the idea of the exile and return constitutes the very core of the intellectual tradition reflected in the biblical texts. Laments (including a number of psalms and Lamentations), the Deuteronomistic History, Jeremiah, Ezek 1–39, Deutero-Isaiah, Ezek 40–48, Haggai, Proto-Zechariah, and the Holiness Code are arranged according to a biblical-historical time line extending from Jerusalem’s collapse to the construction of the Second Temple. Middlemas believes that this arrangement of the texts reflects their origin in the said period in the real world, even though there is not much external evidence to confirm it. One of her statements is most apposite: “The people who had witnessed the ignoble collapse of Jerusalem and the frightful events of the battle or those who had even heard about it, participated in established rites to express their grief” (29). She is certainly right that it is enough to hear to be able to mourn; religious movements at all times have demonstrated it. Belief alone is enough; members

of a religious community do not need to experience the exodus personally in order to be able to participate in Passover.

Chapter 2, on lamentation, describes possible mourning rites instigated by Jerusalem's fall and briefly mentions Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Ugaritic literature that parallels biblical laments. Here and throughout the book, Middlemas is completely loyal to the biblical perspective of things, when, for instance, she draws attention to the fact that "[t]he impression provided by the biblical writers certainly suggests that a great deal of illicit worship took place" (31). Based on classic form criticism, a number of laments are attributed to "the templeless age" on the basis of "references that fit the period" (41), and in general Middlemas easily draw conclusions from the Bible's contents to its referents. A number of details are puzzling, but I shall confine myself to mentioning that Middlemas apparently thinks that the Bible normally distinguishes between myth and history, as the two of them are said to be joined in Ps 89 (40), and in the discussion of the poem in Isa 63:7–64:11 the reader is told that "[h]ope in this lament is based not on myth, but on the history of Yahweh's actions of redemption on behalf of the covenant people" (42). "Myth and history come together in the liturgy of the exile" (50). In another context, when discussing Deutero-Isaiah, Middlemas distinguishes between "mythology and salvation history" (111). The distinction sounds very odd, and there is certainly no such distinction in the Bible itself; it is only in the mind of the interpreter. King David is not less "mythical" than Adam and Eve.

Chapter 3 gives a summary of some recent theories concerning the Deuteronomistic History. Middlemas reassesses the history of ancient Israel "in the light of the collapse of Jerusalem" and bears witness to a change of views about the temple and the deity so that the temple "becomes the location of a hypostasized manifestation of the divine presence—'the name of Yahweh'" (59); hence the Deuteronomistic name theology (58). Intriguing as such views may sound, they ignore the possibility that different theologies of the temple could exist simultaneously. One of the problems with Noth's idea of a Deuteronomistic History is the fact that the history closes on a depressing note: "If that were the case, one has to wonder why the history would have been written at all," says Middlemas (59–60) epitomizing much discussion in the wake of Noth and making at least the present reviewer wonder: Do histories have to end joyfully? In fact, the Deuteronomistic History has the edifying message that in the exile Yahweh's people will repent, and the deity will forgive them (Deut 4:29–31; 1 Kgs 8:46–50) and enable them to fulfill his demands (Deut 30:1–6), which was not possible before what Middlemas has chosen to term the templeless age (Deut 29:3; Josh 24:19; 1 Kgs 8:46). However, the perspective does not reflect the templeless age but that of the Second Temple period and the Diaspora, since Jews from all over the world are mentioned (e.g., Deut 4:27; 30:3–4). Thus I do not think that the statement that the Deuteronomistic History is intended for

“teaching history and ways to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past” (62) is apt. Rather, it teaches that things could not have been different before the Diaspora; it is only abroad that it is possible to repent and gain Yahweh’s goodwill, and then a new Israel is born.¹

Continuing the biblical-historical time line, chapter 4 surveys the “prophets of woe and weal” (64): Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The classic understanding of the prophets is briefly summarized by arranging all of them according to the time line drawn from the Bible. In the words of Hans Walter Wolff, their most basic function was to “steer Israel through great historical changes” (65). Based on the biblical stories, Middlemas seems to have no doubts that prophetic collections predating the fall of Jerusalem existed and that those collections were edited and expanded thereafter (66). I certainly agree; the huge amount of historical-critical scholarship that Middlemas builds upon that traces redactional activity can be ascertained in the biblical books. In short, she has a clear right to think that material predating the fall of Jerusalem, even “prophetic collections,” may have existed, but she owes it to the readers of her introductory book to explain that there are no traces of such early “prophetic collections” outside the Bible. The closest literary parallels in our possession, Mari letters (eighteenth century B.C.E.) and Neo-Assyrian oracles (seventh century B.C.E.), do not bear much resemblance to the biblical prophets’ attempts to change the course of history, and it is well known that the prophetic books of the Bible are unique when compared to other ancient Near Eastern literature,² but Middlemas’s readers will have to do without this very important information when trying to assess biblical prophecy as a literary phenomenon.

Statements such as “Jeremiah began his career as a prophet in the last years of the seventh century BCE” (67) are still all too common in textbooks on biblical subjects purporting to be on the cutting edge in their field. We only know Jeremiah and his colleagues from the Bible; they are characters in a world of texts, and we do not know whether they were also historical persons. The confusion of worlds of texts and history brings about strange observations such as, “[a]fter receiving his call, Jeremiah condemns Judah and predicts the destruction of the nation” (69). What does it mean to receive a call? Who does the calling? Is God a character in history or in texts?

It is evident that there are different types of prophetic messages, and, as always in the book, such differences are attributed to time. Based on the all-too-familiar prejudice that

1. See my *The Tragedy in History: Herodotus and the Deuteronomistic History* (JSOTSup 251; CIS 4; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

2. In the words of M. Nissinen, the material “gives reason to conclude that in Assyria, as at Mari, it was not the standard procedure to preserve prophetic messages for the posterity” (*Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East* [SBLWAW 12; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003], 98).

prophecies of doom and prophecies of salvation are incompatible, the former being original and the latter being due to editorial activity, Middlemas (and much conventional historical-critical scholarship) thinks it is possible to establish a history of development of the prophetic books (82), and toward the end of the templeless age the prophetic message shifted (93). Up to this shift the literature of the templeless age had sought the presence of God in the midst of Israel (Psalms; Lamentations), recorded its history (Deuteronomistic History), and explained what appeared to be divine punishment and the belief in future possibilities after the collapse of society (Jeremiah; Ezekiel). The release from prison of King Jehoiachin “around 562 BCE,” or the appearance of King Cyrus of Persia in 550 B.C.E. as a likely successor to the Neo-Babylonians, instigated literature with a message of hope. Deutero-Isaiah and Ezek 40–48 have as their point of departure the alleged revolutionary view that Yahweh was acting salvifically in their midst and indicated how ancient Israel should respond (93–94).

Middlemas’s confusion of texts with history is tiresome and tends to overshadow her brilliant readings. For example, she notes an interesting parallel between Deutero-Isaiah and Lamentations as Deutero-Isaiah’s Suffering Servant alternates with Jerusalem personified as a woman (Isa 49–55), just as in Lamentations Lady Jerusalem (Lam 1–2) and a suffering strong man (Lam 3) appear alongside each other (96–97). The Servant Songs “reveal the redemptive nature of suffering as a means of explaining that the experience of the community after the collapse of Jerusalem serves a restorative purpose” (101). However, “the redemptive nature of suffering” is actually a very universal type of message and does not presuppose a particular historical situation. Just as it is not necessary to imagine a historical Isaiah of the eighth century B.C.E. in order to appreciate the book’s magnificent songs and oracles, it is not necessary either to imagine a historical “Deutero-Isaiah” of the sixth century B.C.E. The message of Deutero-Isaiah is, in fact, ahistorical: “During the monarchic period, the Davidic king mediated the deity’s presence to the people. After the new exodus, the people are to assume the role of king, as representatives of the deity in the world. They mediate to the nations the knowledge of Yahweh’s presence” (110). This characterization is pertinent, and it does not presuppose the historicity of King David, only his being the literary prototype of a religious community whose members understood themselves as being “representatives of the deity” to the nations. The existence of such a religious community probably presupposes the Diaspora of an era that was later than Middlemas’s “templeless age.”

Haggai, Proto-Zechariah, and the Holiness Code mark the end of the templeless age. There are no reflections on the fact that Haggai and Zechariah, like every other prophet in the Bible, are literary characters whose possible referents in the real world are far from being a matter of course, and again Middlemas mistakes a paraphrase of the Bible for a historical account, as Haggai “single-handedly inspired the rebuilding of the temple”

(118). It would be safer to say that texts are commenting on texts: the prophetic books are comments on the Bible's narrative books, or it could be vice versa.

Whereas Haggai represents the perspective of the Judahites who remained in the land after the fall of Jerusalem (116), Proto-Zechariah brings the repatriates into focus (118). Highly inspired by Peter Bedford, Middlemas advances the idea of a kind of utopia, as both Haggai and Proto-Zechariah are "inclusive in their terminology and their visions of the restored community." The fact that the two books were joined together reflects the character of the time: "The Judahites in the land and the repatriates joined together in a unity of purpose" (124). This paraphrase of prophetic texts hardly represents a probable scenario.

The last piece of literature to be included in the presentation is the Holiness Code, as Middlemas justly deems P to have been concluded "well beyond the sixth century BCE" (125). It is even likely that Persian administrative policies influenced its formation. However, according to Middlemas, the Holiness Code should be linked to the sixth century B.C.E. "Like Haggai and Zechariah, whose prophecies sought in the main to provoke and encourage the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem, the Holiness Code served a similar purpose among the exiles (whether in Babylon or upon their return)" (135). A number of points of resemblance with the book of Ezekiel seem to indicate that the "circles" that formed the Holiness Code should be linked with those who transmitted the book of Ezekiel in its final form. This connection enables us to date the Holiness Code prior to the dedication of the Second Temple in 515 B.C.E., "because the final chapters of Ezekiel (40–48) exhibit a priestly hierarchy that never existed" during the period of the Second Temple (128). Apart from the fact that the year 515 B.C.E. is based on a paraphrase of the Bible that cannot be verified by other sources, the argument quoted for the hypothesis that the book of Ezekiel must predate the second temple is naïve. The final chapters of the book could represent a program that was never implemented, just as the laws in P were never fully implemented. As regards the Holiness Code, it is obvious that Lev 26 presupposes an exilic situation, as emphasized by Middlemas (128). However, it is also clear that more than the Babylonian exile is envisioned, as Lev 26 predicts that Israel will be scattered among nations (vv. 33, 38 *goyim*, in the plural) and refers to their sojourn in the lands of their enemies (vv. 36, 39, *aršot*, also in the plural). The Holiness Code actually seems to presuppose not only the Babylonian exile but the Diaspora of a later period and hence a date well beyond the construction of the Second Temple. Middlemas rightly characterizes the predominant legal material as "an indication of ways the people can live in a reverential relationship with their deity and continue to enjoy the privileges of that special relationship" (133). This "indication" actually looks like a program applying not to the people in general but to a specific religious community, a sect. Far from reflecting an "agreement between Yahweh and the community" (133), the

Holiness Code is Yahweh's dictates, an offer that no one can refuse. To describe it as "a defense of the deity" (133) is misleading, and the "democratic perspective" of not only the Holiness Code but also Deutero-Isaiah (134) is wishful thinking.

A "Summary of the Literature at the Close of the Templeless Age" (135–36) is an outline of texts in dialogue with texts. The uncertainty of Lamentations is countered by Deutero-Isaiah, who provides a vision of restoration, repatriation, and renewal, but the latter's focus is on the journey rather than the homecoming. Ezekiel 40–48 and Lev 17–26 each provides visions of the "homeland" that supplements the idealism of Deutero-Isaiah. Haggai and Proto-Zechariah had practical concerns, as the new era of Yahweh's rule required the reconstruction of the deity's sanctuary. Middlemas is always keen to emphasize the nation of Israel as a continuum extending from King David's era to that of the Second Temple. Likewise, she uses figures of speech that seem to imply that the tradition is a unified whole that grew slowly as each era made its own distinct, identifiable contributions. That, too, is only a paraphrase of the Bible itself: "Priest and prophet together steered the nation on its future course" (136); it would be safer to say that the biblical texts, irrespective of their origin, served to shape religious communities, and, it might be added, they still do.

Among the book's positive features is the grouping of "the literature of the templeless age" according to overarching themes: "immediate responses to disaster, weal and woe, and visions of renewal and restoration" (137). Among the book's weaknesses is the author's identifying these themes with historical reality. It is not necessary, and indeed it is misleading, to read the Bible as a collection of sources emanating from the biblical-historical periods mentioned therein in order for it to make sense. A very readable introduction to important biblical themes is marred by the author's insistence that the texts reflect the very events they describe.