The so-called post-exilic period had significance for the Jews. One of the hazards of nationalism is the exclusion of data that does not fit into that nationalist perspective. It is perfectly understandable that the Jewish people would want to trace their history in their land; but it is true that by the time you get to this period of history, the Jews are mainly elsewhere. They are in Babylon, or in Alexandria, a Greek city; and whether they are one place or the other, they end up in Greek influence. Their durability in their own land suffers all the hazards of the instability of the periods of kings that preceded them. You could safely say that once the Northern Kingdom was removed by the Assyrians and the Southern Kingdom was removed by the Persians, that was the end of the story of the Jewish people geographically.

The Jews did not forget where they came from; they had that living, burning image of their land, and they still have it wherever they are in the world. Today, of course, there are a lot more Jews in the United States by far than in Israel, and there have always been more outside Israel than in, since that final, forcible removal of the Southern Kingdom. So when we think of Jerusalem, or of Israel, or of Palestine (Judea), we are really thinking of an idea more than of a people. As we plunge into this period that is such a jumble of names and people and assassinations and confusion, let us not get overawed by the details. What we want to do is not memorize facts, which themselves may be irrelevant, but to understand what was actually happening.

Realize the possibility that when their land was no longer more than an idea, when their dispersion was so extensive, when great and learned communities of Jews arose in both the east and in the south (in Egypt) you might even conclude that God was taking away the concept of a political kingdom. Was he trying forcibly to focus their attention upon a spiritual kingdom? Remember that Jesus said before Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world." That was a revolting thought! They thought it was of this world. They sang "Hosanna," which means, Let’s get rid of the Romans now! They misunderstood the triumphal entry, and many modern Christians even misunderstand. Many modern Christians think that it is very important that Israel become a kingdom again. Now, it is beyond the remotest thought that Jewish people would ever rule the world as Alexander tried to, or Hitler; but they tried. They really worked hard at it. Solomon’s kingdom was an enormous place, and when the Maccabees took over and eventually extended the territory far beyond what is today Palestine, they must have had such thoughts in mind.

In fact, it is quite possible in view of the spectacular achievement of Alexander. He probably accomplished more for good as well as more for evil than almost any other person. The youthfulness, the drama, the vigorous military achievements of Alexander were probably in the minds and hearts of the people who seized control from the Persians and the Seleucids and began a new, faltering, very brief empire. A hundred years is not so brief, but the Hasmonean period really went downhill from the beginning; it was not really very likely to become a new Alexandrian type of empire.

But Alexander has remained an evil model for many young people who somehow dream that they can do what he did in one way or another. By putting to death every single man, woman and child in the city of Thebes at the very onset of his conquest, he proved what kind of a person he was. When in the

New Testament we see John’s head on a platter, or the cross of Christ, we should not be especially revolted, because that was not unusual at all. There were 800 of the more zealous Jews who were put on a cross by one of the Hasmonean-Herodian tradition, which theoretically was Jewish. Even Herod was part of that Edomite or Idumean (two words that mean the same thing) kingdom south of Jerusalem, which had been converted wholesale by the Maccabees. Herod was not really accepted as a Jew. But in all that confusion and violence and assassinations and counter-assassinations, we do not see anything that looks as if it is going to become a secular kingdom, or even a cultural tradition that will endure.

The irony is that those Jews who lost the political kingdom, but who hung on to their cultural traditions, went equally wrong. They did not really accomplish very much, any more than Christians who would hold on for dear life to their Lutheran or Latin or English traditions and would split hairs over formalities. (Some have called this “morphological fundamentalism,” which means that it is not theological, but has to do with liturgical fixity.) Such people, hanging on for dear life to outward forms, have obviously, whoever they are—Jew or Christian—missed the deeper point that apparently God had in mind. One of the things that we need to realize, then, is not to pay too much attention to the political externals or even the cultural forms, but to understand the purposes and the spiritual meaning behind all of this, especially in global terms.

One other comment: it may very well be that you never realized how many books there were on these subjects beyond the Bible itself, and why we would have to bother with other materials. Although we do not need to be overawed by all this mass of literature, we certainly ought to be friendly to it. It was the Christians preeminently, as well as the Jews and the Muslims, who preserved literature. I would say the vast proportion of all the literature we have in either its original form or its copied form is due to the instinct, if you want to call it that, of the Jews, the Christians, and the Muslims to preserve it. It is impossible to find anywhere else the detailed information as far back in history as in the Bible and the other books that were also carried along with the Bible. The Bible included, until modern times, other books called the Apocrypha. The Christians copied other books called the Pseudepigrapha and many other totally secular books without which we simply would not know a tenth, or maybe even a hundredth, of what we know about ancient times.

We need to bear in mind that our focus is not to memorize all the dates and details. The point is a growing globalization of a very significant faith, and we do well to keep our eye on the main idea.

Reflections

Reflection #1
You might wonder why the Bible is not a growing document, updated by God every century and covering all of history, so we would know what God’s point of view at every point is. On the other hand, if the Bible makes plain a divine understanding of history, and we are to continue to follow it, then we should not be too upset that the Old Testament essentially stops 400 years before Christ. We ought to be able to look at the next period of 400 years through the eyes of the earlier periods for which we do have a Bible. I think basically this is what is called the biblical philosophy of history.

There is a very distinct set of factors in this biblical philosophy of history. I believe that God intends us to look at our own nation from that point of view, as well as at other nations and other periods of history. We simply gain a certain perspective from the OT, and we are supposed to continue on with that perspective.

Reflection #2
“What mission significance is there in the Jewish loss of (or inability to gain) secular power?” This loss of kingdom in the secular, political sense freed the Jewish people and forced them back to their own faith as a universal and intercultural entity. Now it is true that very few actually saw this clearly. The transmission of the faith in the Greek language was of incredible significance, and to this day it is considered translatable. This is different from the Jewish tradition, which still holds to its own language. Something very special and sacred about their own cultural tradition and their own language is believed.

On the other hand, the Islamic tradition, which has the same attitude, refuses to translate their book, which is both a strength and a weakness. Everywhere in the world little children are memorizing portions of the Qur’an in sing-song notes that drone the book into their heads, but with little real value. This allows for an external uniformity that unifies the global Islamic
tradition to some extent, although there are great differences between different forms of Islam. But Christianity does not have that formal exterior in terms of its Book; and this has, on balance, been a far greater advantage than a disadvantage.

Reflection #3

“How do we know what happened outside the Bible and what does it matter?” Well, the Bible itself regards other writings as valuable. In 1 Kings 15:7,23,31, for instance, other books are referred to, but there are dozens of references in the Bible to other books, both direct and indirect. Paul refers to writings of his time and appeals to them as would modern sermonizers appeal to current literature. But the Jewish and, especially, the Christian and Muslim traditions have held other writings of all kinds as of high significance. You find great libraries being cared for by Christians and by Muslims. In fact, the Muslims often employed Christians and Jews to care for documents. Most of our knowledge of ancient times is the result of this high view of truth wherever it is found. A way of putting it that Tertullian is noted for is that all truth is God’s truth.

Reflection #4

“In what three ways did Jewish messianism defectively reflect the biblical concern for the salvation of all people?” Here we are specifically indebted to Dr. Russell, who actually lists these three versions, or reactions, all of which are in some way defective, to the biblical concern for the salvation of all peoples. I might add, this is not a uniquely Jewish phenomenon. You can see exactly the same thing occurring in the Christian tradition, as we are very aware: the Christian tradition itself for the most part shuts out all peoples. Witness the fact that missions itself is an almost unknown phenomenon, even in American churches which have, relatively, a very strong mission tradition. But as Russell states, the biblical concern for all peoples, which is definitely there, is understated.

But secondly, and much more virulently, Jewish messianism actually reversed the biblical concern for all peoples, and the Gentiles became enemies rather than objects of love and outreach. Thirdly, any kind of nationalism, if extreme, will make other nations second in importance. We find this very often in the Christian tradition, not just in the Jewish case. It is rather astounding that not even the people who followed Jesus closely really understood clearly this biblical concern for all peoples. I think the most astounding passage of the Bible is where Jesus overtakes two of his followers after the resurrection, which is not yet fully clear to them, and they are grumbling (Luke 24:13-35). The downcast attitude of these two men is very obvious. They are unhappy; they may have been part of the crowd that sang Hosanna, hoping for instant results and national rescue. All that is gone; they are really shattered in their attitude. Jesus says, “Hey, fellas, what’s the problem?” They snarl at Him; they lash back and say, “Are you the only one in Jerusalem who doesn’t know what happened?” They’re really angry, and actually, He is the only one who does know what is really happening. It is one of the most astonishing passages in Scripture.

Then they spill the beans. He says, “Well, no, tell me.” He leads them along, and they come up with this statement, which I will read verbatim, and you ask yourself what kind of implicit messianism does this involve? They say, “The things about Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word in the sight of God and all the people.” So far, so good. Okay? “And how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him up to the sentence of death, and crucified Him.” Again, they are just being descriptive. This does not in itself reveal what they had hoped. But the next few words are incriminating in the extreme. Yet I think many modern readers just figure, “Hey, why not?” Anyway, they go on to say, “But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel (NASB).” They obviously had a political concept in mind.

Now, we throw around the word redeemed all the time. We talk about people being redeemed, not, I hope, in a purely mercenary sense like a prosperity gospel. That is a form of individual messianism: in other words, what can God do for me? But we do see here a very clearly deficient understanding of His purposes. This passage perhaps more than any other shows the great distinction between the concept of a Messiah as Jesus understood it and the messianism, the political, nationalistic and cultural durabilities to which they clung. This is something that is very important in our understanding. We, too, should not expect and hope that our country will do all the right things at the right time and will somehow perform God’s will for us. We need to believe that other countries and other peoples have just as much right as ours to grope their way into the will of God, and not to expect the kind of messianic or Zionist hopes that we find in the Bible. We certainly cannot and must not assume that the Jewish people
were worse off in their understanding or were more disobedient or more sinful than others who tried and sought to follow the living God.

All the way down through Christian history, as well as Islamic and Jewish history, you find these same encroaching misunderstandings which are contrary to the biblical perspective. So we have, then, a very muddied and muddled picture if we read the Bible cursorily. Too often, we do not understand what it is that God is really up to. That is the great challenge of our time.