



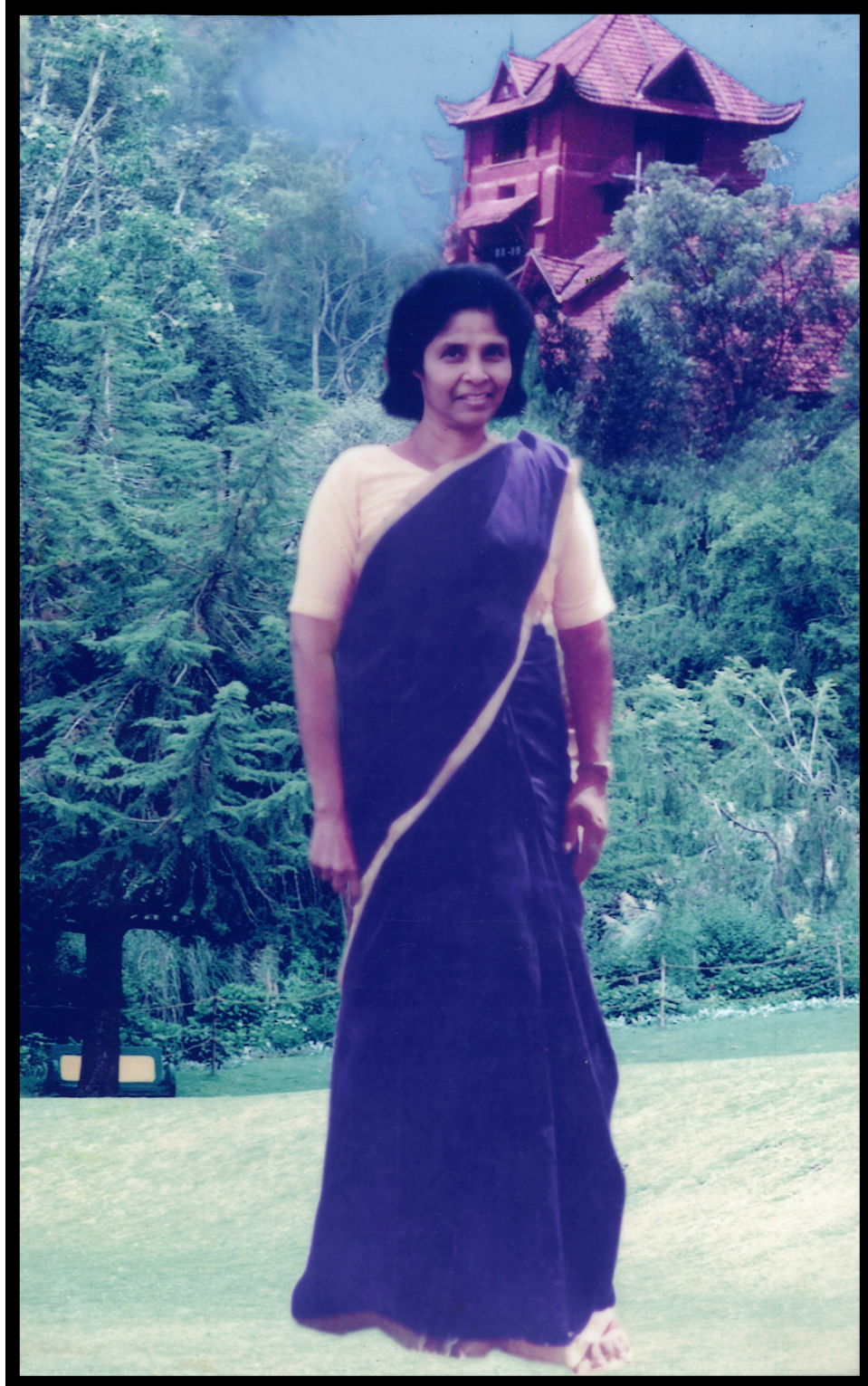
Under Yokes of Iron



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Book cover compiled and edited by Salma Carunia Carter



In the Summer of 2017, Salma traveled to Italy and stayed in Rome, near the Vatican. She presented her scholarly husband's books and writings to the Vatican Library. In September of 2017 she received a thank you letter from Pope Francis expressing appreciation, acknowledging the gift of inscribed copies of Dr. Ben Michael Carter's writings with his personal photo with the Papal seal.



This book is dedicated to those helped Dr. Carter in his journey:



Reverend Forrest & Anne Gearhart.

Reverend Forrest Gearhart was a great help to Mike during his quest to find God while in San Juan, Puerto Rico from 1978-1981.



Bruce & Judy Fowler.

Bruce was Mike's Sunday School teacher.



Cliff & Nancy Friesen.

Cliff was a doctor who treated Mike's soul.

UNDER YOKES OF IRON: An Introduction to the Prophets



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Preface

In Acts 8:26 - 39 we read how Philip going into the desert of the Gaza found a eunuch from Ethiopia studying Isaiah. The two men began to discuss the text and in the course of the conversation the eunuch stepped from his chariot and asked to be baptized by Philip. In the first centuries of the church people often came to faith in Christ by reading the prophets. One of the most famous of those converted in this way was Justin Martyr, the great second century Christian apologist. Following the advice of an old man who suggested that he might find truth in the Hebrew prophets, Justin turned from the philosophers and began to ponder those ancient Jewish scrolls. Like the eunuch, he, too, came to faith in Christ.

The prophets perform this role much less frequently today. Most people simply consider the prophets, with their strange images and their unfamiliar thought patterns, too difficult to understand. When we read the Old Testament, we turn to Psalms and Proverbs, to Genesis and Exodus, or to the books of Samuel and Kings, but we spend comparatively little time with the prophets. Nevertheless a great deal of prophetic language has over the centuries crept into our everyday speech and most of us have a general idea of what the prophets said even though we may not know which prophet said what. This book was written for those who have such preliminary knowledge. It is intended not as a scholarly text but as a fairly brief introduction to a topic about which a library of books has been written. It is a book which, rather than discussing the prophet's entire message in detail, concentrates on favorite passages which the reader is likely to know, and describes their meaning and significance from within a Christian perspective. It also attempts to discuss those passages in the order in which they were most probably delivered and to present in brief form those historical events out of which the prophecies were born. This accounts for the somewhat unusual way the book is organized.

As the frequent scripture references indicate, this book should be read with a Bible in hand. I have drawn my quotations from the King James Version (the KJV) because I love its phraseology and language, but occasionally for clarity and contrast I have referred to alternative translations as found in the Revised Standard Version (the RSV), the New International Version (the NIV), or the American Standard Version (the ASV). The reader is invited to use whatever version he or she finds most familiar. The best way to benefit from this book is to read it slowly, considering the historical background for the passages within the broader context of Scripture itself.

If this book leads the reader into a deeper appreciation of the prophets and acts as a catalyst for further study, it will have done its job



Introduction

Europe, Asia, and Africa converge to form what we known as the Levant, that region washed by the eastern Mediterranean where today one finds the countries of Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. Great powers have vied with one another here since the beginning of history, and according to some interpretations of Revelation 16:16 the last battle of history will be fought in one of the Levant's valleys. During the period covered in the Old Testament, three empires: Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon, periodically contested ownership of the region, and Israel, a kingdom that proved to be cosmically pivotal, dominated the Levant for several centuries. This is the backdrop against which the Old Testament prophets speak. They understood Israel as central to all human history, and while their view of "the world" comprised little more than the Levant and regions immediately beyond it, their words are universal. This is because the God whose purposes they proclaimed is not just the God of Israel, he is the God of all nations. Indeed, he is the God of the entire universe.

During a time when polytheism tended to be religiously dominant, the perception of the prophets was radical. But there was more to this radical perception than the idea that the God of Israel was the one supreme God. The prophets also proclaimed the estrangement of God from his creation. Using Israel and Judah as examples, a practice their hearers found shocking, they proclaimed that this estrangement was a consequence of universal human disobedience. This meant that all the nations - indeed all of creation - were under divine judgment. They also proclaimed that this divine judgment was a predicate for divine mercy and that human history was the outworking of a process that would end with the reconciliation of God and humanity, and the recreation of the natural world. History, which had begun with a human disaster, would end with the triumph of God's people. The prophets revealed that while Israel was central to God's purposes, those purposes would ultimately involve all of humanity.

Ancient Israelites established themselves in Canaan by invading that land and displacing the Canaanites, the people who were already there. Believing God was angry with the Canaanites because the religion the Canaanites practiced, though once focused on God, had become corrupt, the Israelites understood their invasion as an expression of God's judgment on the Canaanites (Genesis 15:16; Deuteronomy 9:5). Hence, the idea that invaders are agents of God's judgment on corrupt worship became a central tenet of the Israelites' faith and is an idea one frequently encounters in the prophets.

Around the eleven century BC the twelve tribes of Israel organized themselves into a kingdom. They initially selected Saul to be their king but as time passed Saul showed himself to be inadequate to the demands of his office so the kingdom was taken from him and given to David. The first book of Samuel tells this story.

Because David's heart was right before God, God swore to be faithful to David's descendants always. God's promise to David was the same as an earlier promise God had made to Abraham. Because Abraham was faithful to God, God promised to be faithful to Abraham's descendants always. The Israelites understood themselves to be Abraham's descendants through his wife Sarah. Hence the Israelites had assurance that God would be faithful both to them as a people and to their kings. This faithfulness, the Israelites believed, was rooted not in human actions but in God's own character. Hence they believed the promises of God could be relied upon absolutely. God did not have to bind himself to any nation. He had freely bound himself to Israel as a testimony to the faithfulness of Abraham and David.

Although it had a human king, Israel's ideal was theocracy. God was ultimately sovereign. Consequently Israel's priests because they mediated between God and the Israelites enjoyed a great deal of power. This power became accentuated from the time of Solomon when the seat of government and the temple were constructed in the same city: Jerusalem.

However, the terms defining the precise nature of the Israelites' special status before God were explained in a legal code God had given to the Israelites. This legal code was in the form of a contract which stipulated that if the Israelites adhered to the provisions of the law, they would prosper, but if they failed to adhere to those provisions, they would be punished. The prosperity was alluring, the punishments severe.

The threat of punishment increased the power of the priests since much of what they did was believed to deflect God's anger should individuals under terms of the contract violate its provisions. The threat of punishment also created another center of power within Israel. Because God loved the Israelites, he did not seek to punish them before giving them sufficient warning so they would have an opportunity to correct their behavior or at least understand why they were being punished. To this end God called a group of men and women out of a group of already recognized religious professionals: the prophets.

Prophets had well-established roles in many religious traditions during this period. They were believed to reveal God's will for people, to have the power to curse or bless in God's name, and to foretell the future. Many people believed that some of the more powerful prophets could control the weather or find lost items.

But in the theocracy that was Israel, those God called out from among these traditional prophets had a new role: they warned the Israelites of God's impending judgment. They reminded people of their frequent failures to obey all the terms to which God's covenant obligated them, and they told the people that because of this God was angry and would punish them, something God had a perfect legal right to do.

One problem according to the prophets was the old problem that had plagued the Canaanites: corrupted worship. Although the people would go to the temple and offer sacrifices to God, they tended to understand God in very limited terms. God was in their mind the god of the nation, but they also believed the land itself was populated with gods who predated the arrival of Israel's national god, and that these gods also had to be propitiated. Hence the people not only sacrificed at the temple, they also sacrificed at local shrines where the gods of the land, the *baals*, were worshipped. The people intended in this way to keep all the gods happy, their own national god as well as the gods of the land. It did not occur to them that their national god was God.

These special prophets often acted outside the company of the traditional prophets. Some of their prophecies were recorded, some were not. But whether or not the prophecies were written down, it was not easy for those in the presence of such prophets to forget their words. These prophets, because they announced God's judgment, often sounded harsh, and they occasionally behaved in bizarre ways. Many of those who heard them thought such prophets were trouble-makers, or mad, or worse. After all, these skeptics reasoned, the temple of God was in Jerusalem and the priests served in that temple day and night. As the temple was the center of Jerusalem, so Jerusalem was the center of the world. These skeptics knew that God had often intervened to deliver his people from their enemies or from natural disasters, and they knew that such interventions glorified God himself. They also knew that God's faithfulness was rooted in God's very character. Hence, they believed that to suggest, as these harsh-sounding prophets did, that God would abandon his temple simply because some Israelites had failed to live up to their end of the bargain, was to cast doubt on the integrity and faithfulness of God.

We should not assume by this that such skeptics were ignorant of the terms of the covenant. They knew that God had promised that if the Israelites were disobedient, they would "be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth" (Deuteronomy 28:25), a promise that the nation would not automatically prevail and implying the temple could fall. But surely, such people reasoned, the nation of Israel had not been sufficiently disobedient to deserve such harsh punishment. One need only look at how the other nations behaved to see how much better Israel was than they were. Would God really use less righteous people to punish the more righteous? Would it not make more sense for God to continue

to exalt Israel as a witness to the benefits of even a substandard righteousness and of course to glorify himself?

To threaten the temple was a serious matter. Even after the destruction of the first temple, the one built by Solomon, charges that Jesus had said he would destroy the temple built by Herod were enough to get him arraigned before the Sanhedrin (Matthew 26:61). Indeed, the Jews during the first centuries BC and AD considered actions against the temple to be a form of blasphemy. So it is not hard to understand why prophets preaching during the first kingdom period that God would destroy his temple and send his chosen people into exile failed to gain a receptive audience.

But after the Babylonians destroyed the temple in 586 BC, the Israelites, who had by this time begun to think of themselves as Jews or descendants of Judah, the largest of the surviving tribes, pondered the catastrophe and began to realize that the harsh-sounding prophets had been the true prophets after all. Therefore they kept those harsh-sounding prophecies that had been written down and interpreted their history in terms of the insights they gained from those prophecies. This is the origin of the Old Testament and marks beginnings of Judaism, a faith that expresses a higher theological truth than the one embraced by the earlier Hebrews.

Today we, too, can learn much about God from these harsh sounding prophets. It is our purpose in this study to examine their prophetic vision not by looking at everything they said but by looking at some of the more popular passages and interpreting those passages against later Christian revelation. Before we proceed with this study, however, we should make two disclaimers. First, this study will not approach the prophets from a dispensationalist standpoint. Dispensationalism, for those readers who may not be familiar with the term, is a reading of the Scriptures which dates to the middle of the nineteenth century and is usually associated with Plymouth Brethren leader John Nelson Darby. Darby probably got the germ of his idea from Margaret Macdonald of Port Glasgow, Scotland, who in the early part of 1830 had a vision pertaining to the end of history and the second coming of Christ. Inspired by this woman's vision, Darby interpreted the biblical revelation by dividing it into a series of administrative economies or dispensations. The purpose of these dispensations was to test humanity in various ways. Such dispensational scenarios can become very imaginative but one common denominator identifying them all is their presupposition of a radical distinction between Jews and Gentiles, and their assertion that the Age of the Church, which they place between the sixty-ninth and seventieth week of Daniel's prophecy, is part of a historical parenthesis in God's plan of salvation. Hence it is usually held among dispensationalists that the church is not heir to Israel's promises, that a restored temple (usually identified with the one in Ezekiel) complete with animal sacrifices will herald the last days, and that in those days the Jews will have to endure a tribulation as new witnesses for Christ, a tribulation the church, having been taken up to heaven, will be spared.

By the end of the nineteenth century dispensationalism had become a dominant theme among that group of Christians in the UK, the USA, and Canada which by 1920 would begin to call themselves "fundamentalists". Dispensationalism spread, particularly in North America, partly through Dwight L. Moody's campaigns, partly through the birth of Bible schools to train missionaries and later clergy for the new "Bible churches" being built in the wake of the fundamentalist/modernist controversy, and partly through the interdenominational Niagara Conferences on prophecy held at Niagara-on-the-Lake in Ontario between 1883 and 1897 which grew out of the Believers' Movement for Bible Study organized in the 1860s by James Inglis and George C. Needham.

The most famous dispensational scheme is the one developed by C.I. Scofield (1843 - 1921). A decorated soldier who served in the 7th Regiment of the Tennessee infantry under Robert E. Lee during the American Civil War, Scofield after the war became a lawyer and in 1869 was admitted to the Kansas bar. He went into state politics (Kansas had become a "free" state in 1861), and served as a representative in the state legislature until President Grant in 1873 appointed him as a US attorney for Kansas. In 1879 for unknown reasons (but probably because of excessive drinking) he abandoned his family, left his law and political career, and moved to St. Louis, and the same year experienced an evangelical conversion through the witness of Thomas McPheeters, a YMCA

worker. Scofield was disciplined by James Hall Brooks, a Presbyterian and dispensationalist who had read widely in J.N. Darby and other Plymouth Brethren. He assisted Dwight L. Moody in his campaign in St. Louis and became acting superintendent at the local YMCA. In 1880 he was licensed to work in the Hyde Park Congregational Church, and by 1882 he moved to Dallas, Texas, where he was ordained. Securing a divorce from his first wife in 1883, he later remarried. In 1885 (the date is sometimes given as 1888) he began publishing *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* which established him as a leading defender of dispensational premillennialism. By 1895 when he left it, his Congregational mission church had grown to over 800 members. Having served as the superintendent of missions in the South and Southwest, Scofield founded the Central America Mission in 1890 and began a correspondence course teaching Bible knowledge which he sold to the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago in 1915. He returned to pastor his Dallas church between 1902 and 1907 before becoming involved in the Northfield Bible conferences in Massachusetts and the Niagara Bible conferences at Niagara-on-the-Lake in Ontario. His reputation was secured when the Scofield Reference Bible was published by the Oxford University Press in 1909. This Bible has probably been the most influential Bible in missions this century.

Scofield divided history into seven dispensations: the Dispensation of Innocence (before the Fall), the Dispensation of Conscience (from the Fall to Noah), the Dispensation of Human Government (from Noah to Abraham), the Dispensation of Promise (from Abraham to Moses), the Dispensation of Law (from Moses to Christ), the Dispensation of Grace (the Church Age), and the Dispensation of the Kingdom (that is the Millennium). The Millennium ends by bringing in the Eternal State.

As should be clear, prophecy was a very important theme in dispensationalist teaching. This became especially significant after the establishment of the state of Israel by the United Nations in 1947. As several generations of dispensationalists had predicted the reappearance of Israel as a state, many among the fundamentalists viewed the event as an authentication of dispensationalism.

Because a large number of popular books on prophecy have been influenced to a greater or lesser degree by dispensationalist teaching, dispensationalism has enjoyed an impact far beyond its immediate circle. This study purposes in its own small way to counteract some of that impact by showing the viability of a more traditional understanding of the prophets.

Second, feminists and their sympathizers have been very critical of masculine imagery for depicting God. Such imagery, they argue, causes women to feel excluded from full participation in the church, from fully sharing in salvation, and even from full identity with their humanity. Hence a campaign has been launched to feminize images of God, often by using non-gender specific (i.e., "inclusive") language about God whenever possible. Because the feminist interpretation of language can make the prophets sound like agents of an emerging and soon to be oppressive patriarchy, it is incumbent upon us to spend a few moments addressing this issue.

The prophet's use of masculine images for God has nothing to do with current social structures and everything to do with doctrines of God's personhood and creative capacity. The prophets' language must be understood against the background of the prophets' own world, a world in which polytheism with its masculine and feminine deities was the dominate religious model.

God was free to choose any people or culture through which to reveal himself. He chose a culture which had a system of masculine symbols for deity strongly in place, then strengthened those symbols leading up to the birth of the man Jesus of Nazareth. Part of this strengthening was consequent to God's insistence that he was absolutely unique. While many Israelites might have believed that Yahweh had a consort, Deuteronomy explicitly negates such a belief (Deuteronomy 4:39; 6:4). And the prophets proclaimed with Deuteronomy that there was no other besides God (Isaiah 44:6, 8; 45:5-6; 47:8, 10). Interestingly such an affirmation did not end with an assertion of divine androgyny. There are at least four reasons for this.

First, assigning God a sexual identity humanized God, stressed God's personhood and underlined the important principle that one could have an intense and intimate relationship with God.

Second, God's masculine nature served to distance God from creation. Had God selected a feminine image, the distinction between God and creation could easily have become blurred. A goddess could be imagined as creating the universe out of her own body and hence as being intimately identified with the universe. While masculine symbols distance God from creation, God imagined as father affirms God's nurturing role. Masculine symbols for God also serve to accentuate the miracle of the incarnation. Were God through the act of creation already identified with the world, the incarnation would have been mere redundancy. Hindu faiths, for example, believe in many divine incarnations.

Third, masculine symbols serve to stress the miraculous quality of creation. They demonstrate without equivocation the absence of any human parallel for comprehending that act.

Fourth, masculine symbols tend to underline the love element in both the act of creation and the sex act. Had God chosen to portray himself as having a consort at the time of creation, sex and creativity would have merged and God's creation of the universe could have been understood not as an act of love itself but as the act of desire between deities. And because God creates without sex, sex itself is liberated from being merely reproductive. Furthermore, Christ's crucifixion is highlighted. It reveals the full nature of the love God expressed by creating the universe. The willingness to die, not the desire to procreate, is the highest act of love. Hence the creative masculine God who is then willing to die for his creation expresses miracle and love more purely than a goddess could have expressed it.

Consequently, this study will make no use of feminist language theory. This is not to say that such theorizing has no value in the larger social discourse. It is only to say that in the present context such theorizing is wrongheaded.

Finally a word needs to be said about our selection of the prophets. In this study we will not be considering Jonah or Daniel. Neither of these prophets are writing prophets in the sense we are using the term. Significantly Daniel is included in the Hebrew Bible not among the prophets but among the Kethuvim or Writings, a category that includes Job, Psalms, Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Ruth, Lamentations, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, and I and II Chronicles. While the Hebrew Bible does include Jonah among the minor prophets, his story and what it reveals about God is the central point of the book rather than anything Jonah himself proclaims.



Chapter One: Historical Background for the Writing Prophets: Assyria

Since the third millennium BC Egypt had controlled the Levant.¹ We see evidence of this in Genesis in a rather indirect way. Compared to the rest of Old Testament history, the stories in Genesis seem almost pastoral. Save for an occasional tribal raid like the one involving Lot and Abraham, there is little fighting in Genesis. Instead we encounter herders, traders, and agriculture, and we frequently see important figures journeying to Egypt. This suggested stability probably reflects the presence of imperial Egypt. But by the beginning of the book of Exodus the Egyptian presence in Sinai seems to have weakened considerably. Instead of Egyptian power, one sees fortified cities. And throughout the books of Joshua and Judges Egypt is not present at all. We see instead a collection of smaller regional powers. This dovetails remarkably well with what we know of Egyptian history from other sources. The twentieth dynasty founded by Setnakht in 1200 BC saw the beginning of Egypt's decline, a decline from which it was never to fully recover. During the reigns of Ramses IV and V (1166-1156 BC), Egypt lost her Asian empire, and by 1140 BC and the reign of Ramses IX economically distressed Egyptians were pillaging tombs. Although Egypt remained a power to be reckoned with, she was no longer able to enforce her will in the Levant as she once had. Egypt's decline allowed for among other things the rise of Israel. It also created a power vacuum Assyria and Babylon would find irresistible.

Having established themselves in Canaan, the Israelites were often at war with surrounding kingdoms. Philistia hugging the Mediterranean on the west, Syria (also known as Aram) bordering Galilee and Bashan on the north, and Moab and Ammon to the east were the proximate enemies of the Israelites. But the kings of Israel and later Israel and Judah were able to dominate or stalemate these rivals through their own power or through the power of shifting alliances. It was Assyria and Babylon which proved to be the nemeses of the Israelites. Since the writing prophets came later than those who left no written records, and since Assyria and Babylon threatened the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah during those later years, the writing prophets were primarily though not exclusively concerned with these two great powers.

Assyria traces its roots to Ashur, a small city-state on the upper Tigris River. Its rise to greatness began around 1300 BC when under Shalmaneser I and his successors the Assyrians struggled to secure their frontiers against the Mitannians, the Urartu, the Kassites, and the Elamite tribes. Under Tiglath-pileser I (*circa.* 1113-1074) Assyria captured, then lost, Babylon, and expanded its influence in Syria and Phoenicia, but by the reign of Ashur-rabi (*circa.* 1012-975) pressure from advancing Aramean tribes, who were migrating into the region from the west, cost the Assyrians the territory they had occupied along the Euphrates River. This loss of territory was for Assyria the beginning of two centuries of turmoil following the death of Tiglath-pileser I.

Ashurnasirpal II (883-859) oversaw the beginning of the rise of what historians today call the Neo-Assyrian empire (Assyria in most English translations of the Bible). Moving the capital of Assyria to Nimrud (also known as Calah), he began to initiate trading contacts along the Mediterranean. His son Ashurbanipal III (*circa.* 884-860) sent his armies to secure these commercial contacts and organized Assyria's administrative structures along imperial lines. Ashurbanipal III was succeeded by Shalmaneser III (859-824) who captured cities north of Karkar and in 853 BC defeated a coalition of kings at that site. Although the battle of Karkar is not referred to in Scripture, we know from inscriptions on the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III discovered by Sir Austin Henry Layard in 1846 that Ahab, king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, contributed 2000 chariots and 10,000 infantry to a coalition of kings in an effort to stop Shalmaneser III.

As Karkar is northwest of Hamath (modern Hamah) on the Orontes River, one might have expected Shalmaneser III to press his advantage and attack Hamath immediately, but either the battle

¹ In compiling the history chapters, I have used a variety of sources which are listed in the bibliography. However for many of the dates, especially the more specific ones, I relied upon the third edition of Samuel J. Schultz's *The Old Testament Speaks* (New York, Harper & Row, 1980).

of Karkar had weakened his forces significantly or the Assyrian army had yet to reach that level of proficiency that characterized it later. Whatever the reason, Shalmaneser III did not press his advantage until 848/47.

Between 841 and 837 BC Shalmaneser III in an unsuccessful effort to capture Damascus attacked the Syrian king Hazael five times before turning his attention to campaigns in the north.

Ahamshi-adad V assumed the throne in 823 BC and reigned until 811. He spent much of his rule suppressing revolts. Adadnirari III (810-783), and Ashurnirari (754-745) were able to maintain Assyria as an important regional power but were not able to lead its armies on campaigns of conquest. It was during this period when Assyria was relatively quiescent that Hosea and Amos began to prophesy.



Chapter Two: Hosea and Amos

Section A: Hosea

The Davidic kingdom divided into two parts after the death of Solomon approximately 931 BC. The larger part was the northern kingdom of Israel. The southern part was the smaller kingdom of Judah. The Old Testament is primarily a Judean document. Except for Hosea and Amos, all the written prophets whose words were the basis of the reinterpretation of Israel's and Judah's histories compiled during the Babylonian exile directed their message toward Judah. And Amos himself, though he preached to the Northern Kingdom, was a citizen of the Southern. Of all the writing prophets, Hosea is the only one who, as a citizen of the Northern Kingdom, had a message for that kingdom.

Hosea (the name means "salvation" or "help") began his ministry under the Israelite king Jeroboam II who probably reigned from 782-753. Samaria fell in 722 so Hosea preached his message only a generation or so before the kingdom came to an end. Hosea is remembered for both his words and his deeds. Commanded by God to marry Gomer who was either a harlot at the time of the wedding or later became one, Hosea used his marriage to demonstrate his message.

From the textual critic's point of view Hosea is one of the most difficult Old Testament books to understand. What appear to be anomalies pepper the text and suggest to many scholars that it has been significantly corrupted. Others are not so sure and think that the apparent anomalies may be components of Hebrew as it was used at the time and hence reflect nothing more than Hosea's unique style. But whether the anomalies indicate textual corruption or are simply idiomatic, their combined effect means that Hosea is one of the more problematic texts in terms of its meaning. But the prophet's marriage helps us to grasp the central tenet that Hosea wants us to understand: God's redeeming love.

The problem that concerned Hosea was the debased worship that had come to characterize religion as practiced in the Northern Kingdom. Because the temple was in Jerusalem and Jerusalem was in the Southern Kingdom, Jeroboam I, the leader of the ten tribes in their revolt against Judah and Benjamin (the two tribes that comprised the Southern Kingdom - I Kings 12:21), feared that if his new subjects went to Jerusalem to sacrifice, their political loyalties would become confused. Therefore, he set up two alternative altars, one at Bethel and one at Dan, and commanded the people to sacrifice at these, a practice that, because it led to debased worship, became a sin for the people (I Kings 12:28-30).

To understand what the problem in Israel (and also in Judah if archeological discoveries of a vast number of Asherah figurines are reliable indicators) was, we need to understand what a *bamah* or high place was. As we begin this discussion, we must remember that Israel was a theocracy, a reality underlined from the time of David and Solomon when the ark of the covenant was moved from Shiloh to Jerusalem and the temple was built. We should also be aware that the Israelites did not distinguish between sacred and secular as we do today. For them as for most ancient peoples the whole world was sacred. This meant that the Israelites thought of their nation as sacred and understood Jerusalem to be the Holy City, the nation's center and the place where Yahweh was worshipped. Israel's focus on Jerusalem as the sacred center of the nation was the culmination of the emergence of Israel as a self-recognized unity. This self-recognition began with or immediately preceded the kingship of Saul and culminated with the reign of Solomon.

During earlier centuries when the judges ruled and Israel was a collection of loosely affiliated tribes, worship was largely provincial. Such provincial worship encouraged the elevation of local fertility deities who rivaled Yahweh as the focus of people's attention. To comprehend more fully how the people themselves probably understood the situation, we may think of them as acknowledging the power they believed local deities exercised while they acknowledged Yahweh, the cult deity of the royal household, as the national god. Yahweh, worshipped (albeit

inconsistently) by Israel's kings, secured political and military advantages for the people while the *baals* secured favorable weather and productive fields and herds.

Bamot (the plural form of *bamah*, that is the high places or shrines, local places of worship) trace their origin to the time of the judges. *Bamot* varied considerably, implying that the worship performed there may have been equally idiosyncratic, but the archeological record reflects increasing uniformity among the *bamot* during the time of David and Solomon. Interestingly enough this uniformity seems to have been maintained even after the kingdom divided into northern and southern parts, suggesting an effort by the monarchy of both kingdoms to enforce some kind of order at the local shrines, to incorporate them within the royal cult, and to undermine their provincial side. Yet the prophets tell us and archeology confirms that these *bamot* remained sites where the *baals* were worshipped. It is reasonable then to assume that the Levites, who were chosen by Yahweh to officiate at his worship, must have regularly connived with the people in the debased worship at the *bamot*.¹ Remember that the Israelites believed debased worship had provoked God to drive the Canaanites from the land.

As the tribes of Israel were in a covenant relationship with God and as this covenant relationship was understood in terms very like marriage, such worship of other gods looked very much like marital unfaithfulness, and it was against such "whoring" that Hosea and later the other writing prophets inveighed.

Probably the three best known passages in Hosea are 6:6; 8:7a; and 13:14. Let us discuss each of these verses.

**For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more
than burnt offerings.**

Hosea 6:6

Hosea admonishes the Israelites to "sow to yourselves righteousness, reap in mercy" (10:12) before lamenting that because of their confidence in their own strength and their stubborn insistence on their own way, they have plowed wickedness, reaped iniquity, and eaten the fruit of lies (10:13). In Scripture, righteousness is closely identified with obedience. This idea is found as early as Genesis 15:6 where it is written that Abraham, because he believed God, was counted as righteous, an idea upon which Paul builds his argument in Romans (see Rom. 4:3), and an idea that is often voiced by the prophets. Yet as Hosea's marriage to Gomer illustrates, the action birthed by righteous belief is mercy. Mercy grows directly out of righteousness. Joseph evidenced this quality when, finding that Mary was with child, he determined to put her away privately (Matthew 1:19). Believing as he did that she had been unfaithful, he would have been within his rights to shame her and destroy her reputation. Under Mosaic law he could have demanded her death (Leviticus 21:10). But Matthew tells us that because Joseph was a just man, he opted for mercy. In this he was like Hosea.

We read in Proverbs 10:12 that love covers all sins and in Proverbs 16:6 that mercy and truth together purge iniquity. Note that. Mercy and truth working together, not against one another and not in isolation from one another, purge iniquity. Too often today we expect a mercy shielded from the light of truth, or truth exercised without mercy. Neither can purge iniquity. Hosea did not shy from the truth about Gomer but knowing the truth sought to win her back. Therein lay her redemption.

Both Hosea's words and deeds imply that God's love is a jealous love, a love that brooks no rivals, the kind of love we would expect from God based on Exodus 20:4-5. But jealous love, precisely because it is love, does not delight in the destruction of what is loved once jealousy is provoked but earnestly desires the loved one's repentance. Because God loves us, he longs to bless us. He who

¹ *Biblical Archaeology Review*, May/June 1994, "What' a Bamah? How Sacred Space Functioned in Ancient Israel" by Beth Alpert Nakhai, pp. 18 - 29

created us knows that fellowship with him, a fellowship for which we were created but which has been ruptured by our disobedience, is vital for us. Jealous for us, God longs to show us mercy in order to reestablish fellowship with us. Hence, like Hosea seeking after Gomer, he calls us to repent.

Such repentance, presupposing disobedience, demands sacrifice from both parties. This shows us that sacrifice because it is done in response to disobedience is inferior to obedience. Note in this regard that Samuel's words when he admonishes Saul are similar to Hosea's except that obedience is substituted for mercy. Samuel says:

Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to harken than the fat of rams.

I Samuel 15:22

But once sin has been committed, sacrifice is required, not an empty formalism that evidences no real awareness of the nature of what one has done to harm the offended party, but a sacrifice that expresses repentance. Indeed, David tells us that repentance is the soul of sacrifice, so central that when it is present, it can substitute for sacrifice. Having sinned with Bathsheba, he says:

For thou desirest not sacrifice; else I would give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.

Ps. 51:16-17

Hence we see that mercy (Hosea), obedience (Samuel), repentance (David) are all superior to sacrifice. The inferior nature of sacrifice is even suggested by God's willingness to accept substitutes. Yet so serious are the consequences of disobedience that because of them sacrifice is required. Sacrifice points to the separation sin has imposed between God and humanity. Thus the sacrificial cultus of Judaism even in its most pure form illustrated not the closeness of God but his distance from his people. To express his love God wanted intimacy with those he loved. This intimacy could not be secured by human action anymore than Gomer could have enjoyed intimacy with Hosea simply by returning and apologizing. Securing intimacy again requires action by the offended party. God would finally sacrifice himself through his Son. Christ's sacrifice marks the great and final fulfillment of Judaism as well as its transformation.

For they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind...

Hosea 8:7a

The word translated as wind is *ruwach* which means an exhalation and can serve as a metaphor for life, anger, or insubstantiality. The context that Israel has set up political authorities without God's direction and has used its wealth to manufacture idols makes it clear that what the prophet is talking about is insubstantiality though anger may also be suggested. The Israelites, intent on going their own way, had rejected what was good and in the process had rejected God. Their apostasy made them subjects of God's wrath. By sowing insubstantiality (*ruwach*), they would reap *cuwphah*: storm, tempest, whirlwind.

This judgment is consequent to the covenant by which God and Israel were bound (see Deuteronomy 27:10-26). Hosea believed that because of Israel's unrepentant apostasy, God would visit his people with a terrible judgment. And indeed Assyria was waiting in the wings.

I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction:

repentance shall be hid from my eyes.

Hosea 13:14

Paul borrows the Septuigent version of this passage to clinch his argument in I Corinthians 15:55, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave where is thy victory?" Hosea appears to be referring to Israel in his prophecy, but Paul dramatically applies it to Christian believers, indicating that in the church Israel is universalized. The words also, by pointing to the ultimate defeat of death itself, a destruction from which God promises not to repent, suggest the triumphant resurrection of believers on the last day.

Section B: Amos

Though Hosea's contemporary, and though having a message for the Northern Kingdom, Amos was from Judah. A resident of Tekoa (Amos 1:1), a village about ten miles south of Jerusalem, Amos, rather than being a professional prophet, was a herdsman and a grower of sycamore figs (7:14 as translated in the ASV), yet God called him to Bethel, one of the two sites Jeroboam I established to counter the temple at Jerusalem, to prophesy against Israel.

Like Hosea, Amos condemned paganism, but he also criticized social injustices found in both Israel and Judah. Like many of the prophets to follow him, Amos was very concerned by the presence of poverty among God's chosen people as well as with the oppression of the poor by those in power. To understand the source of that concern, it is helpful to look at the fifteenth chapter of Deuteronomy.

In Deuteronomy 15 we discover both a promise and a prophecy. The promise (15:4) is that there shall be no poor in the land since God, faithful to his part of the covenant, will bless the people, that is give them prosperity (Deu. 28:8 meaning that Yahweh and not the *baals* controlled the weather and fecundity). However, we also see in Deu. 15:11 that the poor will never cease from the land. This is a prophecy and implies that the people will fail to adhere to all the particulars of the covenant, a failure that would earn them curses rather than blessings (Deuteronomy 28:15). This meant during the time of Amos that such prosperity as the people enjoyed was theirs gratis. They could make no legal claim to it since they had failed to adhere to the terms of the agreement. In the midst of God's bounty, the poor were an expression of God's judgment and a witness against the nation. It was therefore incumbent upon the prosperous to show mercy toward the poor since the poor were poor because of everyone's sins while the well off testified to God's overarching mercy and had been entrusted in their prosperity with the instruments of that mercy. Hence, not only was the presence of the poor a reproach, abuse of the poor compounded that reproach. This abuse, as we have noted, was of particular concern to Amos.

Three well-known passages come from Amos. They are 3:2-3; 5:24; and 9:11

**You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will
punish you for all your iniquities. Can two walk together, except they be
agreed?**

Amos 3:2-3

In this passage God through Amos is referring to the covenant he had with all the tribes of Israel. Though the Davidic kingdom split into Northern and Southern parts after the death of Solomon, the covenant was still valid for those tribes. That they were now divided into two kingdoms had no impact at all on the validity of the Mosaic covenant. Having chosen them from all the peoples of the earth, God offered them material blessings in return for their obedience to certain particulars. Yet despite their protestations of faithfulness, the Israelites had been rebellious from the beginning (Deuteronomy 9:4-7). They had failed to do what they knew was expected of them. Rather than the favor they anticipated, they discovered that the covenant they were under made them the focus of God's wrath.

...let judgment run down like waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.

Amos 5:24

This sentiment is common among all the writing prophets. The context of the passage makes it clear that God is interested not in ritual but proper discernment (judgment, that is, right judgment), and acts of righteousness based on that proper discernment (5:21-23). Ritual was believed to have a creative function. It was intended to be a way of capturing or recreating a moment in the divine economy. As such ritual was intended to be that which put people in touch, if only for a brief time, with what is really real. The writing prophets rejected this view of ritual. Instead they saw ritual - even ritual instituted by God - as empty formalism if performed without the proper heart attitude.

During the seventh and sixth centuries BC a religious revolution swept the world from Greece through China. Prior to these centuries a religious perception that seems to have been global celebrated the efficacy of ritualized blood sacrifice for normalizing the relationship between the holy and the polluted. The origins of this system of belief are unknown, but because it is global, one may suppose it is very ancient indeed. The sacrificial cultus centered in Jerusalem was a divinely inspired variation of this global perspective. However during the seventh and sixth centuries apparently spontaneous reform movements rose to challenge this ancient belief.

In the early seventh and late sixth century in the Middle East Zoroaster established the faith that still bears his name. In Greece during the same period Thales, as he pondered the question of origins, rejected the many creation traditions he knew and resolved to consider such evidence as could be found in the earth itself. His inquiry marks the beginning of Greek philosophy. In sixth century China Lao-tzu born at the beginning of the seventh century BC composed the eighty-one poems that would become the core of Taoism. In India Siddhartha Gautama in the sixth century BC rejected the sacrificial system practiced by the Brahmins and began to teach a way of enlightenment that was to multiply into the many forms of Buddhism we know today. Also in India during the same century Jainism, tracing its doctrines through a succession of 24 Tirthankaras or saints, was founded by Vardhamana, while back in China at the beginning of the sixth century and the end of the fifth century Confucius formulated his doctrine. Each of these movements was distinct, but they had this in common: each involved at least in part an attempt to substitute some kind of ethical system in place of ritualized blood sacrifice, and together they constituted one of the most far-reaching and radical religious reformations of all time. This extraordinary development was heralded by the prophets of Israel whose vision during the Babylonian exile of the sixth and fifth centuries would be configured as Judaism, a restructured version of the Israelites' original faith. Across a great swath of the world a transformed ethics rather than ritual was beginning to be appreciated as a means of relating to the ultimate however that ultimate was conceived.

In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old: that they may possess the remnant of Edom, and all of the heathen, which are called by my name, saith the Lord that doeth this.

Amos 9:11 - 12

While a gentile could become a Jew, such a conversion meant the gentile had to embrace all of Jewish culture. Judaism's exclusivity required this. Hence, many Jewish Christians argued that gentiles could become followers of the Messiah but must do so as fully practicing Jews. In Acts 15:15 - 18 James, the head of the church in Jerusalem, quotes this passage from Amos as justification for his decision that gentiles should be allowed in the church as full members without at the same time having to conform to all the requirements of the Mosaic law. In this way the

Jerusalem council secured Christianity as a cross-cultural faith. Amos, James said, showed that the restored tabernacle of David had a place for all people. One could be a follower of the Messiah and remain within one's own culture.

The idea of God as creator is absolutely fundamental to Judaism and Christianity. Not only does this idea make intelligible the miracles (which are best understood as individual acts of creation), it also secures a belief in God's ultimate control of events and helps us to understand something of God's role as judge, a point we will examine further when discussing Jeremiah.

In Romans 4:17 Paul refers to "God who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were". Paul's thesis here is predicated upon his realization that God creates by speaking. What God says happens because God's word is creative. Hence God cannot lie. Were God able to lie, his spoken word could prove itself ineffectual. Thus when Christ, God's Word enfleshed, commands them, the elements obey. Providence is a form of miracle and, as we observed above, all miracle is founded upon God's immediate creative power.

A basic tenet of modern science is that by using inductive reasoning, one can generalize principles by observing particulars. The Greek philosophers would have said that science assumes the essence of a phenomenon is revealed by its accidents. But Christianity, identifying the spirit of creative power with the spirit of truth, has traditionally distinguished between accidents and essence. Because God's word is creative and God's work is secret, the Christian realizes things are not what they seem.

This concept is central to the Christian's understanding of Christ's work of redemption where the unrighteous are called righteous. And it also means that the future through God's providence is assured regardless of how out-of-control and uncertain events in the present might seem. God cannot be surprised. Indeed, the prophets proclaim that everything which happens secures God's purposes. Isaiah is even so bold as to refer to those events which seem counter to God's intentions as God's strange work (Isaiah 28:21). Because God is creator and always in control, it is a small thing for him to fulfill his word.

We are creatures of culture and are prone to assign to culture an importance it does not have in the divine scheme. This happens because we conceptualize through culturally mediated patterns and tend to confuse the essence of an idea with its cultural accidents. Hence, we are inclined to believe that God's truth will transform everyone into what we are. If we are Chinese, we tend to imagine God as Chinese. If we are English, we think of God as an Englishman. So it should not surprise us that the Jews, under covenant with God and promised a messiah, thought of God as Jewish. But God transcends all such categories.

Amos prophesied early that there would be a place for gentiles in the kingdom. Salvation, he said, is for the remnant not only of the Jews but of all the gentiles. Amos' prophecy was fulfilled with the advent of Christ, David's descendant, whose covenant, as the writer of Hebrews demonstrates, is far superior to anything the Israelites enjoyed under the Torah of Moses. Israel was not a culmination but a preparation. God chose Jacob's descendants to create a culture where the messiah would be expected and might be heard, then God used the forces of history to smash that culture so that the Messiah's message could be released into the nations. Judaism was a cultural husk containing a marvelous seed, a seed that could flourish in all cultures. So long as the essence of Christianity is preserved, the accidental qualities of culture are largely irrelevant. Nations come and go. Cultures flourish and die. But the creative power of God assures that the church will endure as a haven for the remnant he calls out of all cultures across history.



Chapter Three: Assyria and the Rise of Nineveh

Tiglath-pileser III (referred to as Pul in I Kings 15:19 and as Pulu in Babylonian records) ascended to the throne of Assyria in 745 BC. He was the first Assyrian king we know of to record the events of his reign in annals, and he had much to record. Leading Assyria on its first major campaign of conquest in almost a century, he first subdued Babylon, then in 743 moved against Sarduris III, king of Urartu, a domain by Lake Van west of the Caspian Sea. He completed this conquest in 735, then the following year, encouraged by the Judean kings Jotham and particularly Ahaz who declined to join with Israel, Syria, Philista, and Edom in a coalition against him, he turned his armies against Philista. In 732 he captured Damascus of Syria, the city that had frustrated Shalmaneser III. Tiglath-pileser secured the territory he conquered by dividing it into provinces and moving large groups of defeated peoples into provinces distant from their native ones, a practice that substantially reduced the danger they would rebel. This policy also encouraged the spread of Aramaic, the language that was to become the lingua franca for much of the Middle East.

Tiglath-pileser III died in 727 BC and was succeeded by Shalmaneser V who attacked Israel and in 722 captured its capital Samaria. This marked the end of the Northern Kingdom. The ten tribes that had followed Jeroboam I in his revolt against Solomon's successor Rehoboam were scattered and the prophetic words of Hosea and Amos as they had proclaimed judgment against the apostates were fulfilled.

Shalmaneser V died the same year Samaria fell and was succeeded by Sargon II, one of his generals, who ruled until 705 BC. Sargon II completed the conquest of the Northern Kingdom, captured Carchemish in Syria on the northern Euphrates, resubdued an assertive Babylon, and in 720 won a great victory at Raphia, a village on the border between Egypt and Palestine where in 217 BC another great battle, this one between Ptolemy IV and Antiochus III, was joined, a contest Ptolemy IV won. Though Raphia was conquered, Sargon died in the struggle for the city.

Sargon II was succeeded by his son Sennacherib (704 - 681) who made Nineveh his capital. Nineveh, the city of Ishtar on the east bank of the Tigris River in what is today Iraq, was founded according to Genesis 10:11 by Nimrod of Asher. Archeologists tell us the site has been inhabited since 6000 BC, making it Assyria's oldest city. The name by which we know it derived ultimately from the Sumerian *Nina* which, as a sign depicting a fish inside an enclosure, signified the goddess Ishtar. A city so ancient had known many periods of decline and prosperity, but under Sennacherib it became truly magnificent. He literally rebuilt the city and erected a dam at Ajeila to control the Khasr River which flowed through the Ninlil Gate and past Sennacherib's "palace without a rival" on its way to the Tigris. He also commissioned the construction of an elaborate system of canals and aqueducts which brought water to Nineveh from the surrounding hills. This enabled the city to support what was to become the largest population in Assyria, a population that according to some estimates may have been as high as 175,000. The walls which enclosed Assyria were eight miles in circumference. When they were completed they were one hundred feet high and so broad that three chariots could be driven abreast along the top of them. These walls were surmounted by a system of fifteen hundred towers, each two hundred feet high. Within the city itself were 7,800 acres of grand parks and fields.

But Sennacherib is not remembered for the construction of architectural splendors. Instead he is remembered for his disastrous campaign against another ancient and magnificent city: Jerusalem. In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah of Judah (II Kings 18:13; Isa. 36:1) or 713 BC "did Sennacherib come up against all the fenced cities of Judah and took them." Sennacherib also, despite Hezekiah's appeals for peace, lay siege to Jerusalem. Then according to II Kings 19:35 "the angel of the Lord" slew 185,000 of Sennacherib's troops in one night, forcing him to break off his siege and withdraw. Herodotus, writing in the fifth century BC, records in the one hundred and forty-first chapter of the second volume of his *History* that the Assyrians were defeated on the borders of Egypt when a sudden plague of field mice chewed up their bowstrings and other leather

equipment. Since mice carry disease, the event described by Herodotus might be the same as the one related in II Kings.

However Sennacherib though he was never able to bring Jerusalem to heel did go on to defeat Egypt in 701 and destroyed Babylon in 689. In 681 while worshipping at Nineveh he was murdered by two of his sons who, after they committed the deed, fled to Armenia. Esar-haddon, another of his sons, succeeded to the throne (II Kings 19:37).



Chapter Four: Isaiah and Micah

Section A: Isaiah

During the reign of King Uzziah in Judah and after Tiglath-pileser III marched against Urartu, Isaiah began to prophesy and continued to proclaim God's word through the reign of Hezekiah. Isaiah 6:1-8, a passage called "Isaiah's vision", indicates he might have been a priest. Certainly he lived in Jerusalem and seems to have had easy access to Judah's kings during a time when Judah was a tributary to Assyria (II Chron. 28:21). According to a tradition to which Hebrews 11:37 may be referring, Isaiah was sawed in half during the reign of Manasseh. Whatever the manner and time of his death, he probably finished prophesying sometime between 687 and 680, shortly before or around the time Sennacherib was murdered.

The scroll he left us is the most important among the prophets in terms of the sheer number of messianic references it contains and is quoted in the New Testament more than any other prophetic book. So important is Isaiah to Christians that he is sometimes called "the evangelical prophet". Textual critics working with suppositions that have come to maturity during the last couple of centuries commonly divide Isaiah into two, three, or even four parts, assuming that different authors working at different times were responsible for each part and that the whole was eventually unified under the name of Isaiah during the exile or immediately after it. Hence one will often see Isaiah 1 - 39 referred to as First Isaiah, Isaiah 40 - 66 (or 40 - 55) referred to as Second Isaiah (or Deutero-Isaiah), and Isaiah 56 - 66 referred to as Third Isaiah. Isaiah 24:1 through 27:13 is sometimes called "Isaiah's Apocalypse" and dated to the Babylonian exile when other apocalyptic texts were penned. We will not be making such assumptions in our study. We will assume that Isaiah 1:1 which identifies what follows as "the vision of Isaiah" accurately describes the entire work. It seems clear that the book is intended to be read in that way and it is also clear that the suppositions used to justify the divisions in Isaiah rest on a philosophical framework that is problematic and unwarranted by any external evidence. Nor is it clear that dividing the book into parts as is done by the majority of textual critics today has made its message any more accessible, though it has in the eyes of some compromised its authority.

Isaiah contributed to the language of Jesus in many ways. Isaiah 5:1-7 provides the background for Christ's parable of the wicked husbandman as recorded in Matthew 21:33-41. Matthew 13:14-15 records Jesus' quotation of Isaiah 6:9-10 to illustrate the people's lack of spiritual understanding. Isaiah 13:10; 27:3; and 34:4 provide some of the judgment imagery found in Matthew 24. To underscore the validity of his messianic office, Jesus referred to Isaiah 29:18-19; 35:5-6; and 61:1 to answer John the Baptist's concerns. From Isaiah 53:4-8 comes the identification of the messiah with the man of sorrows, the suffering servant (Matt. 8:17; Acts 8:32-33), an identification peculiar to Christianity. Jesus quotes the Septuagint version of Isaiah 54:13 when, in the gospel of John, he states that no one but he himself has seen the Father (John 6:44-46). Isaiah 58:7 may well be the ethical injunction behind Matthew 25:35-36 when Christ, referring to the last judgment, explains to the sheep and goats his reasons for separating them. Isaiah 60:21 lies behind Christ's words in Matthew 15:13 as Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11 lie behind Christ's words in Matthew 21:13. Isaiah 60:21 is probably the source for Christ's imagery in Matthew 15:13. Isaiah 64:8 and 65:16 refer to God as Father, a designation Jesus stressed when describing both his relationship to God and the relationship to God he secured for believers.

Not only does Isaiah contribute to Christ's language, it also (as suggested by Jesus' assurances to John the Baptist) delineates the actions which will reveal the messiah. For example, both Isaiah 62:11 and Zechariah 9:9 are fulfilled when Jesus enters Jerusalem on the foal of an ass.

However, in this study we will not be discussing any of these passages. Instead we will be focusing on ten others which are just as well known and which have done much to shape our Christian theology.

Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

Isaiah 1:18

Reason in this sense suggests arguing a case before a judge. As Job puts it. "There the righteous might dispute with him; so should I be delivered forever from my judge." (Job 23:7) The Hebrew word for reason and dispute used in the two passages is the same: *yakach*. It means to argue, justify, or convict. While Job expresses confidence that he would be delivered forever should a righteous individual (by implication Christ) plead his case before God, in Isaiah the corporate body or nation is addressed, and the problem is not that a righteous individual is suffering but that the national entity is riddled with sin. Isaiah is assuring his hearers that although they are guilty, God will justify them, not by overlooking their misdeeds in some indulgent way but by actually transforming them. Through Isaiah God is telling his people that they are to expect to be changed in an essential way. Their purity will not be superficial but will express a change at the very core of their being. This passage in Isaiah is a harbinger of the promise of recreation that dominates so much of the book.

And he shall judge among the nations and shall rebuke many people; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Isaiah 2:4

Here Isaiah begins with the authority of God as judge not only of his covenant people but of all nations. Then building from that authority Isaiah promises that although God will rebuke many, the final result of his rebuke will be plenty and universal peace (symbolized by the beating of swords and spears into implements of agriculture). Nations here does not mean the geopolitical entities we have come to think of as nations. Those realities were born in Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and exported into the world as a consequence of European colonialism. Rather the Hebrew word translated as nation is *goy*, and nations as the authors of Scripture use the term refers to a single aggregate of people identified by a common language or by cognate languages. In this sense one might speak of being a member of the English nation, the Cherokee nation, or the Tamil nation. But the fact that "nation" would not have suggested to Isaiah's hearers what it suggests to us does not change the meaning of Isaiah's message for us. Isaiah is telling his hearers whether they lived almost three thousand years ago or today that God is the ruler of all people. What is more, Isaiah is also telling his hearers that when God's reign is actualized through his authority as judge, its hallmarks will be peace and prosperity. This tells us something important not only about the character of God but also about the current human condition. We know from this passage that God is the God of peace and prosperity. We know from our own life experiences that peace and prosperity do not characterize human existence here on earth. And we know from this passage as well as many others that we are all under God's judgment. This last statement points to human disobedience and coupled with our life experience suggests strongly that human conflict is primarily a human problem. James describes the problem this way:

Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: but every man is tempted, when he is drawn away with his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.

James 1:13-15

From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even from your lusts that war in your members?

James 4:1

While we know from other passages that God does use war between nations as an aspect of his judgment of nations, that is not the facet of God's providence that Isaiah stresses here. Isaiah acknowledges that reality but builds upon it to point to a time of blessing following God's final judgment, a period Christians have traditionally termed the millennium.

Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Isaiah 7:14

Ahaz was one of the wicked kings of Judah. We are told in II Kings 16:3-4 that he was not only an idolater but also offered his own son in sacrifice to pagan gods. He looted the temple in Jerusalem of its gold and silver and sent the plunder to Tiglath-pileser II (II Kings 16:8). He even had Uriah the priest build a copy of the altar in Assyria and put it in the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem so that Ahaz when he returned from Damascus, could sacrifice on it. For his entire reign Ahaz, to protect his kingdom from the Philistines and from the alliance which Syria and Israel had made, followed a strong pro-Assyria policy, turning not to God for help but to Tiglath-pileser III. Yet it was to this wicked king that Isaiah spoke words of assurance and who was the first to hear the promise referred to in Matthew 1:22-23 that God through a woman would send Immanuel.

Immanuel, the name of the boy child, is constructed from the Hebrew word *im*, an adverb or preposition meaning with, and *el* meaning strength and usually suggesting divinity. Hence the name is translated as "God with us" and suggests a divine immediacy that is radically new consequent to the birth of this child. The sign that this is the awaited child is that a virgin shall conceive him.

Since the first century Christians almost without exception have affirmed that Jesus was born of a virgin. Two of the gospels: Matthew and Luke, incorporate accounts of Christ's birth which stress that Mary was a virgin when she conceived and bore Jesus. With the exception of a few groups in the early centuries, groups later condemned as heretical (more of this later), Christ's virgin birth was universally affirmed by Christians until the 18th and 19th centuries. Even Muslims affirm the virginity of Mary when she conceived and bore Jesus.

In the 18th and 19th centuries a rationalistic metaphysics coupled with a mechanistic Newtonian model of the universe dominated intellectuals in the West. Such a model imagined the universe as a closed continuum, a vast machine in which God either could not or would not intervene. Deism was the respected intellectual position of the day. Miracles were viewed as impossible. The French mathematician and physicist Jules Henri Poincare (1854 -1912) resorted to paradox to express this idea when he said that the only miracle was that miracles do not happen.

In this environment a movement arose among Christian apologists to try to tailor the gospel message to fit the dominate view of the day. As part of their program to make the gospel "relevant" they too denied Christianity's miraculous dimension and proposed that the Bible could best be understood as an inspired book of symbols intended to guide humans toward authenticity. To this end they argued that the story of Mary's virginity combined pagan and Jewish elements and was an attempt by the people of the time to underline Jesus' special qualities. However, this position seems untrue to both pagan and Jewish traditions. While pagans had many stories of sexual intercourse between gods and women, these women were not always virgins before the intercourse and were certainly not virgins after the intercourse. Also such events were usually believed to have taken place in mythic rather than in historical time. Jews, too, had their accounts of miracle births (Isaac, Samson, Samuel) but the women who bore these children were not virgins. Hence, the Jewish accounts were more like the birth of John the Baptist than they were like the account of the birth of Jesus. This means that it is most unlikely that the Virgin Birth account combines elements of Jewish and pagan traditions since such traditions *did not have stories of virgins giving birth to sons*.

Second, those who want to deny the Virgin Birth insist paradoxically that it is a symbol but one that has no theological significance. The British theologian James Barr has been a particularly

prominent champion of this position. It is a strange position to hold since symbols are generally created to express significance. If the story of the Virgin Birth has no theological significance, why would the early church have made it up?

In this regard it should be noted that the Virgin Birth was affirmed before its theological significance was explored. Matthew and Luke simply assert it and say nothing more about it. It is not until the second century that Christian apologists begin to employ the story in a theological way though they do not do so from any unified perspective as we might expect them to were they referring to a story created to express an agreed upon theological significance. Ignatius in his disputes with the gnostics (those who denied that Jesus had a real body) and the docetists (those who denied that Jesus suffered) points to the Virgin Birth as illustrating Christ's humanity. Because Jesus was born of a woman, believers could be assured that he had a real body and really suffered. Ignatius also used the Virgin Birth to affirm Christ's divinity when he argued against the Ebionites (those who believed that Jesus was the natural son of Mary and Joseph and was elected by God when baptized by John). In Ignatius' view the Virgin Birth signified Christ's divine origin because it showed God was Jesus' father. Justine Martyr in his debates with Trypho the Jew sees the Virgin Birth as another example of fulfilled prophecy. While this argument is borrowed from Matthew and is not so theologically advanced as the ones Ignatius used, it is nevertheless an example of how apologists in the second century could employ the gospel account as they defended the truth of Christianity in different situations, a circumstance that seems more in line with the supposition that the story relates an event in history which reveals its richness upon reflection rather than being formulated to express a set of theological propositions.

By the time we get to the Apostles Creed the Virgin Birth is firmly enshrined as a central doctrine though there are many important truths the Creed does not assert (e.g. that Jesus performed miracles or that Jesus was a Jew). It would therefore seem reasonable to suppose that the story of the Virgin Birth has theological significance and that it existed before such significance was fully articulated.

Why then should Christians believe in the Virgin Birth? There are five reasons. First, Scripture teaches it. In the account in Matthew 1:18-25 Joseph does not know who the father of the child Mary is carrying is until an angel reveals the truth to him. Then Matthew ties the account to Isaiah 7:14. We need to realize that this passage was not considered a messianic passage by the Jews. Many people throughout history have claimed to be the messiah, the anointed one, the especially chosen of God, yet none of them claimed to be born of a virgin. That is because being virgin born was not considered a prerequisite for the messiah. Hence, there was no a priori reason for Matthew to connect Christ's birth to the Isaiah passage.

Matthew quotes the Septuagint version of Isaiah. In the Septuagint version the Hebrew *almah* is rendered as *parthenos* which means virgin (the Parthenon was "the place of the virgins"). Those who reject the doctrine of the Virgin Birth point out that *almah* also means unmarried woman, that there is another Hebrew word which means virgin: *bethulah*. Hence, because the Jews had no tradition about the messiah being born of a virgin and since Isaiah did not use the word *bethulah*, the word we would have expected him to use if virgin is what he meant, it follows in their view that the translators of the Septuagint made a mistake.

This argument fails in two ways. First, the Jews in the Roman world were not an ill-educated, culturally obscure group. A great number of them dwelt in urban centers from Chersonesus and Panticapaeum in the Crimea on the Black Sea to Grecian Corinth to Rome. Jews may have constituted as much as ten percent of the population of the Roman empire. Alexandria, one of the intellectual centers of the ancient world, was divided into five sections, two of which were Jewish (one of the three remaining sections had a significant Jewish component). A large and important community of Jewish scholars were present in Alexandria and had been asked by the Ptolemies to translate the Jewish scriptures into Greek, a task which was to engage them for several generations and which ultimately produced the Septuagint. It is unlike that a well educated group of scholars who spoke both Hebrew and Greek fluently would have made so basic a mistake.

Second, we should note that besides the Isaiah verse there are only three other passages in the Old Testament that use the word *almah*: Genesis 24:43 and the Song of Solomon 1:3 and 6:8. In Genesis 24:43 the word *almah* refers to Rebekah, but we already know from Genesis 24:16 where the word *bethulah* was used that Rebekah was a virgin. Concerning the Song of Solomon 1:3, we know from Psalm 45:14 (where the word *bethulah* is used) that the bride's companions were traditionally virgins. In the Song of Solomon 6:8 three classes of women are listed: queens (who would have been married), concubines (who certainly were not virgins), and *almah*. The most natural understanding of *almah* in that context is not unmarried woman (which could also apply to concubines) but virgin. Hence, in each of the three cases in the Old Testament besides the Isaiah passage where *almah* is used, it is best understood as a synonym for *bethulah* or virgin. Such considerations strongly suggest that such is its meaning in Isaiah. Certainly the Jews who translated the Hebrew scriptures into Greek understood it that way. They translated it as *parthenos*.

In the gospel of Luke it is obvious from the context that Mary is a virgin. We know from Luke 1:1-2 that Luke is intentionally writing things down in order. He is employing sources, sifting the accounts for the ones which are most surely believed and for those which come from eye-witnesses. Hence, we know that he is writing with some critical distance. Yet Luke the physician who would know as surely as anyone that the Virgin Birth is a biological impossibility chose to include the account. He must have believed it and gotten it from a reliable source. In Matthew the story is told from the point of view of Joseph. In Luke it is related from Mary's point of view. We do not know what happened to Joseph but we do know that at least two members of Jesus' family were part of the early church: Mary and James. Is it too much to suppose that the accounts related by Matthew and Luke came from one or both of these people, that perhaps Matthew recorded the version he heard from James while Luke wrote down what Mary told him?

There are two other scriptural clues we should consider. Matthew which has a nativity account refers to Jesus in 13:55 as "the carpenter's son" while Mark which does not report the birth narrative renders the same passage as "the carpenter, the son of Mary" (Mark 6:3). To describe Jesus as the son of Mary would have been a very unusual way for a Jew to refer to Jesus. It seems to suggest that Mark knows of the tradition that Jesus was not the biological son of Joseph. In the same way Paul's description in Galatians 4:4 that Jesus was born of a woman is an unusual designation for a Jew to make and suggests he knew of the Virgin Birth tradition.

In sum we can assert with confidence that Scripture clearly affirms that Christ was born of a virgin. However besides the scriptural witness there are four theological reasons for us to affirm the doctrine.

- A. It reminds us that salvation is supernatural. Salvation is not something that human beings begin and God perfects. Salvation begins, continues, and ends in miracle.
- B. As Ignatius argued in the second century, the Virgin Birth reminds us that Jesus was both human and divine, human because Mary was his mother, divine because God was his father.
- C. It underlines the sinlessness of Christ. Had Jesus been born naturally, he would have inherited Adam's sin. As it is his birth involves the direct creative act of God and recapitulates the creation of Eve. As Eve was taken from Adam's body in a special creative act, so Jesus was taken from the body of Mary.
- D. Finally, to assert that Jesus was not born of a virgin comes perilously close to blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. Remember that Joseph did not know who Jesus' father was. This means that if Mary was not a virgin, she was having relations with another man. She was either a fornicator or an adulteress. If when Jesus was conceived Mary was committing a sin, how could the Holy Ghost have come upon her and overshadowed her so that she could conceive a holy child (Luke 1:35)? And how could the angel have told Joseph that the child Mary carried was conceived by

the Holy Ghost? Such an assertion would make the Holy Ghost the author of sin. To say the Holy Ghost inspires sin is blasphemy.

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.

Isaiah 9:6-7

Though not quoted in the New Testament as being fulfilled by the birth of Jesus, these verses are nevertheless some of the most famous messianic verses in all prophetic literature. One can hardly read the passage without humming bars from Handel's *Messiah*. The word messiah is a Hellenized transliteration of the Aramaic word *masiah*. The underlying Hebrew word is *masah* meaning "to anoint with oil". Hence messiah became synonymous with "the anointed one", rendered as *christos* in Greek and as *christ* in English. Although the word can be applied to the altar (Exodus 29:36), to a prophet (1 Kings 19:16), or even to a Gentile leader like Cyrus (Isaiah 45:1), it was most frequently applied to the king of Judah.

The use of the word messiah to designate an ideal king, that is messiah as an eschatological figure, what is traditionally call Israel's "messianic hope", is not clearly articulated anywhere in the Old Testament and finds its origin more in inter-testamental speculation. As one might expect, great variety characterized that speculation. For example, although the strong link between messiah and king coupled with the identification of king with the House of David (notice that in the above passage the promised one is seated on the throne of David) tended to encourage many Jews to expect a single messiah playing a largely political role, the Qumran community was apparently expecting two, one messiah with a political role, the other with a religious.

In the above passage Isaiah is claiming that the promised child will be a king (the government will sit upon his shoulder, he has a kingdom which will increase without end) and a wonderful counsellor (suggesting that his wisdom is divinely inspired - the KJV separates wonderful and counsellor as though both were separate names, a rendering which is certainly possible, but most other translations render wonderful as an adjective for counsellor). He will even be called a mighty god. The Hebrew word translated as god is *el* which means strength. The word translated as mighty is *qibbowr* which suggests a champion or valiant man. The use of the two words together imply Almighty or God. Hence, Isaiah is saying that the promised child will be God, an extraordinary claim. This identification of the child with divinity is accentuated by the phrases "the everlasting Father" and "the Prince (or authority) of (or over) Peace". Through his judgment justice will be established forever. Furthermore, no human being will achieve this, it will be done by the Lord of hosts (that is the God of armies) himself.

The wolf shall also dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together: and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the suckling child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

Isaiah 11:6-9

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the

bullock: and dust shall be the serpent's meat. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the Lord.

Isaiah 65:25

As it is obvious that the existence Isaiah is describing does not characterize our existence today, and as Isaiah's words have a clear future direction, these passages are generally understood as millennial passages, that is as holding a promise to be fulfilled at the culmination of this age. Isaiah's vision of the future derives from his understanding of the primal state described in Genesis. There violence in the earth is closely associated with its corruption (Genesis 6:11-12) while conditions implied in the story of the Garden of Eden suggest that originally all things were at peace. Hence these two passages and many like them in Isaiah stress the peaceful, non-destructive elements characterizing the restored or new creation. The herbivorous quality of carnivores is particularly striking. Paleontologists tell us that carnivores have been part of the scene since the beginning, but Scripture suggests that originally all animals ate plants (Genesis 1:30) and that only after the Fall did they begin to feed on one another. Indeed, it was not until after the Flood that God provided via a covenant with Noah for humans to eat meat (Genesis 9:1 - 4). It is not easy to know what to make of such conflicting visions since the fossil evidence seems to compel the view that carnivores are part of a natural order which came into existence at the beginning, but several possibilities suggest themselves. It is possible that here Isaiah is simply wrong or that the text has been corrupted by unscrupulous scribes. It is possible we have completely misunderstood Isaiah due to sin, our inability to hear him properly because of the cultural differences separating us, or a combination of both factors. It is possible that Isaiah is employing allegory to illustrate the nature of an existence we as beings deeply flawed by sin and conditioned by our experience in this fallen world cannot otherwise begin to conceive. It is possible that because of sin and faulty presuppositions paleontologists have radically misread the fossil record. It is possible that the record itself represents an aspect of God's curse on the earth (Genesis 3:17) and hence cannot be relied upon. It is possible in light of the couple's having been banished from Eden that this world where we now live exists as an intermediate realm of exile between perfection and destruction and has a natural history far different from our original home. It is possible that several of these possibilities may be simultaneously true in various ways. It is possible that the solution to the dilemma may lie in possibilities we have not listed here. For our part, we must assume that Isaiah is not wrong, that the text has not been corrupted, and that despite sin and cultural differences we can still understand, at least in large measure, what the prophet is saying.

For example, it seems clear that Isaiah's hearers would have understood the holy mountain as referring to Zion, the hill in Jerusalem on which the temple was built. For them Zion was the sacred center of Jerusalem and, as we have seen, they would have understood Jerusalem as being the center of the world. Thus the holy mountain would have symbolized for them what scholars of religion call "the cosmic mountain", the *axis mundi* around which everything turns, the *omphalos* or navel of the world connecting heaven and earth. As Christians we have transformed Zion into Golgotha or Calvary, the hill of Christ's crucifixion. Hence, as the author of Hebrews points out (see especially chapters 9 and 10), Christ's sacrifice supersedes the sacrificial cultus embodied in the temple, being one death which satisfies all sacrificial requirements (Hebrews 7:27; 9:12; 10:10). Whether Isaiah would have understood that his words meant that Golgotha would replace Zion is problematic, but there is no reason to assume that any prophet (except of course Christ himself) is fully aware of the meaning of his prophecy. Indeed, a person may not even be aware that he or she has prophesied (see John 11:49-52, the prophecy of Caiaphas, as an example). But that replacement is of profoundest cosmological significance since it means that the blessings of God have been delivered by Christ to the whole world.

**How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art
cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations.**

Isaiah 14:12

Though referring specifically to the king of Babylon (14:4), a power which at the time Isaiah delivered the prophecy had yet to rise (Assyria itself had still to reach the zenith of her power and would raze Babylon in 689 BC), it has become traditional to associate them with Satan for whom Babylon's king acts as proxy. This has occurred primarily because chapters 14 through 18 in the book of Revelation identifies "Babylon" with a world system which is portrayed by John as being satanic and antagonistic to the church.

The Hebrew word translated as Lucifer is *heylel* meaning "the morning star" and is so rendered in the ASV, the RSV, and the NIV. Lucifer by contrast is a Latin word derived from *luci* the singular form of light and often denotes the planet Venus in its role as morning star even as Venus denoted the planet's role as evening star. Lucifer is a word Isaiah did not use and would not have known. Hence rather than allegorizing this passage as an account of the origin of "Lucifer", we are on safer exegetical ground to associate it with the king of Babylon as the text itself indicates. Indeed, that is the very thing that makes the verses so remarkable. As Assyria was the rising power at the time, one would have expected Isaiah's prophecies to focus there. Instead Isaiah sees past Assyria's destruction (implied by his concentration on Babylon) to the destruction of Babylon itself and the rise of Persia. And behind the rise and fall of these empires and their failures to impose a lasting system of governance on the earth, he sees the power of God and understands that power in terms of a future restoration of lost perfection. With occasional exceptions (the use of the term Cyrus for example), the prophet does not see this in any great detail, but he does see an indefinite series of destructions which express God's judgment and prepare the way for God's final victory, what Revelation describes as "a new heaven and a new earth" (21:1).

**Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee:
because he trusteth in thee.**

Isaiah 26:3

The prophet has been proclaiming God's judgment on the nations. Indeed, as a sign to Egypt and Ethiopia, Isaiah walked naked and barefoot for three years (Isaiah 20:2 - 3). God's judgments are expressions of both his authority and strength. Not only does he have the authority to judge, he has the power to express his judgments effectively. Now Isaiah assures his hearers that these judgments only apply in any ultimate way to those in rebellion against God. Those whose minds are obediently fixed upon the true God and who trust in him will be kept in perfect peace. Their trust is secured, as the prophet reminds them in the next verse, by the same strength that makes God's judgments effective. God who is terrible to the disobedient is gracious to the faithful.

Notice that the prophet does not say the faithful have peace because they will be delivered from all the consequences of God's wrath. Instead he says they have peace because they trust in God. Trust because it is trust implies that the faithful see past their present circumstances. They are confident that in the end God will vindicate both his own actions and his followers. Paul uses Abraham as an example of such faith in Romans chapter 4 and in Galatians chapter 3. In Romans 4:17 - 22 Paul refers to Abraham's faith in God's promise that, despite Sarah's barrenness and age, he would be the father of nations, and Paul assures us in verses 23 and 24 that this is recorded not only for Abraham's sake but for ours as well. In Galatians chapter 3 Paul describes Abraham's righteousness as being accounted to him because of his trust and ties that trust to the blessing that comes to the Gentiles by way of Jesus Christ.

Trust and the faithfulness which comes from acting on that trust are for Christians practical equivalents. Our peace which is secured by Jesus himself lies not in our outward circumstances and

not in any pretended claims we can make on God because of our obedience to the law he gave the Jews but because of our trust in Jesus. This Paul tells his Philippian readers (one of whom may well have been the jailer who had heard Paul and Silas singing in their chains and who had been told that to be saved he must believe [Acts 16:12 - 31]) is “the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, [and which] shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7)

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Isaiah 40:3

In Matthew 3:3 and Luke 3:4 the Septuagint version of this verse is applied explicitly to John the Baptist. We know from Luke 1:36 that John's mother Elisabeth was Mary's cousin and that she lived in the hill country of Judah while Mary lived in Nazareth in Galilee. Mary's journey to visit her cousin was not a short one. Scripture does not record the reason for that journey but as both women were pregnant with miracle babies (John the Baptist being conceived after the fashion of Isaac), it is possible that Mary sought Elisabeth for succor.

There are several points to notice. First, the Jews of this period believed that the wilderness was the abode of demons. It was also the place one traditionally sought intimacy with God. Hence, it was the preeminent place of testing. John lived in the wilderness and literally cried out his message from there, and people flocked to the banks of the Jordan to hear him and to be baptized. But the passage in the context of John's ministry also suggests that he was not only crying in the wilderness, he was crying to those in the wilderness. The implication is that Judah had itself become a spiritual wilderness and that a crisis was occurring in which the people of Judah would have to choose between God and demons. It is significant in this regard that John's message was a message of repentance in preparation for the appearance of the kingdom of God for it suggests that by applying the Isaiah passage to John the Baptist Matthew and Luke understood Isaiah to be saying that repentance is the way to make straight the highway upon which God will come.

Second, notice that while John apparently addressed everyone who came to hear him including Roman soldiers (Luke 3:14), he was speaking primarily to the Jews. The message of repentance began with the righteous. That is because the message of repentance is ultimately a message of mercy. As Peter tell us, “...judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begins at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?” (I Peter 4:17) Too often we confuse a message of mercy with a message that ignores repentance and assures us that the deeds in this life are trivial and have no lasting consequences. Such a message is not the gospel message and contains no mercy since it implies no judgment. Instead it is a message that we can keep on sinning because God who loves us will indulge us. The French proverb “To understand all is to forgive all” expresses its essence. Those who preach such a message seem never to consider that precisely because God does understand everything he holds us worthy of final damnation.

Third, the context of the passage in Isaiah shows that these are words of comfort. Isaiah 40:1-2 tells us that we are to repent in joy because our debt is paid and pardon is available. The statement in verse 2 “She has received double for all her sins” could apply to the discipline experienced by the Jews during the Babylonian exile, but in its Christian fullness, which is the sense in which Matthew and Luke apply it, the passage points to Jesus who as the perfect sacrifice more than repaid the debt for all our sins.

Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: but your iniquities have separated you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear.

Isaiah 59:1

Isaiah here reveals that human sin does not weaken God, that is it does not create a situation that prevents God from working or a barrier which God cannot breach. Rather it offends him. Our sin causes God to turn from us in revulsion. However, because God created us to be in fellowship with him, he has provided an intermediary between himself and us. Under the temple system that intermediary was the priest who approached God behind a veil of warm animal blood. Now it is Christ who as God incarnate provides a perfect eternal way between the sinner and himself using his own blood to secure the new covenant.

Why the emphasis on warm blood? As God is the creator and sustainer of all life, to cause God to turn away from one is to cut one's self off from life, that is, to offend God is to embrace death. And of course the one who embraces death must die. Once the sinner has died, the source which caused God to be offended is gone. A large amount of warm blood spilled before the offended one is the evidence of that death.

But in addition to hating sin, God loves the sinner. Consequently God has provided for a substitute to be sacrificed that the sinner might have the opportunity to repent and live. It is an expression of God's deep love for the sinner that this sacrifice must be perfect. Under the temple system the substitute was an innocent and "spotless" (that is physically perfect) mammal or bird, both of which are warm blooded. With the crucifixion of Jesus, the substitute has become God himself in human form. By the death of a sinless man God opens for the sinner the pathway leading to God. That the sinless one had to be God himself in order to be sinless tells us much about the human condition. It also reveals three things about God. First, it reveals his righteousness. God feels revulsion for our sin. Second, it reveals his power. His hand is not shortened. He can overcome his own revulsion at our sin. Third, it reveals his deep love for the sinner, a love so deep that to express it God will sacrifice even himself. He is willing to experience human death in order to overcome his revulsion.

It is worth remembering here that God is not working only to restore his relationship with the individual sinner. Consequent to the first couple's sin, the ground itself was cursed (Genesis 3:17). That curse reached all the way back to the third day of creation when the earth and the waters were separated. Creation itself was deeply tarnished because the ones who had been given stewardship over it had sinned (Genesis 1:28). Hence Paul reminds us that our completed redemption is the key which will free creation itself from bondage (Romans 8:19 - 23). Christ did not just die, he arose from death victorious and in that resurrection demonstrated the redemption of both the soul and the body. Hence the resurrection reveals for us that our promised future is not in Heaven with spirits. If Heaven were our final home, we would not need a body. Instead the resurrection tells us that our final home is on this earth, an earth restored to its initial splendor and peopled by us in our resurrection bodies. The earth was God's original charge to us. We failed in that commission, but Christ has won it for us and has given to us what we could not win for ourselves. So great is God's power that not even primal sin could frustrate his purposes.

Section B: Micah

A younger contemporary of Isaiah, Micah was a citizen of Moresheth, a small village in the foothills of Judah (Micah 1:1). Perhaps because he experienced the corruption of Judah's rulers not as a resident of Jerusalem where such exploitation would have been evidenced in more indirect ways but as a member of the rural population where the exploitation and the hardship it created was more immediate, Micah's condemnation of Jerusalem is strikingly harsh (Micah 3:9 - 12). He also pronounced judgment against prophets who used their office for economic gain (Micah 3:5 - 7), of which there were apparently significant numbers in Jerusalem, for he understood that these

mercenary prophets oppressed the peasants and villagers no less than Judah's rulers oppressed them (Micah 3:1 - 3), no less than wealthy and corrupt landholders oppressed them (Micah 2:1 - 5), no less even than harassing enemy forces oppressed them. He saw clearly how corrupt leadership perverts and destroys a nation. Hence, Micah, like Amos before him who preached in the northern kingdom, is often interpreted today as a spokesman for social justice. However, as we have suggested earlier, those who heard him in his own day would have more likely understood his message in terms of the covenant God has established between himself and his people.

Despite its brevity, Micah's book contains five very well known passages.

**And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning
hooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn
war any more. But they shall sit every man under his own vine and under his
fig tree; and none shall make thee afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts
has spoken it.**

Micah 4:3-4

This passage is almost a word for word duplicate of the Isaiah 2:4 passage we considered earlier. Such similarity strongly suggests that the two prophets knew and respected one another and may have influenced one another. As Isaiah, so Micah: God's authority over and judgment of all nations is asserted as is the belief that God's judgment will culminate in an era of peace and plenty. Like Isaiah, Micah envisions that future era as coming at the end of this age, an age he conceives of as being radically out of joint. He foresees God's intervention at an appropriate time and the reintroduction of the original harmony that was lost with Adam's sin. Given such premises, Micah has, as one would expect, strong messianic overtones.

**But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of
Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel:
whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.**

Micah 5:2

This passage is quoted in Matthew 2:6 when Herod inquires of the chief priests and scribes to demand of them information as to where the christ would be born, thus indicating that it was appreciated as a messianic passage. The name Bethlehem means "the house of bread". There were in fact two villages with that name. One referred to in Joshua 19:15 was part of the territory of Zebulun. It is mentioned only once in Scripture. The other Bethlehem was part of the territory of Judah. As one of the oldest settlements in Palestine, it had a venerable history. Rachel was buried near there (Genesis 35:19) and the grave of Ibzan was to be found there (Judges 12:10). The story of Ruth is set in Bethlehem. David's home was in Bethlehem (I Samuel 16:4) which is doubtless why he longed for water from there, prompting an act of daring by three of his mighty men (II Samuel 23:13 - 17). Though small, its association with David would have made it an appropriate place for the messiah to be born. Yet Bethlehem Ephrath is the village's earlier name, the one used in Genesis 35:16 or 48:7. Both of those passages refer to Rachel. It is almost as though Micah is stressing Bethlehem's connection with Rachel more than its connection with David. This seems odd since Rachel was the mother of Joseph and Benjamin while it was through Leah, the mother of Judah, that Israel traced its kings. Perhaps the indirect reference to Rachel in the term Bethlehem Ephratah complements Jeremiah 13:15 - 17 where Rachel weeps for her lost children and then is promised by God that her work shall be rewarded. In Matthew 2:17 - 18 the Jeremiah passage is applied to the victims of the massacre Herod ordered. By pointing to Rachel's weeping as a prophecy fulfilled by Herod's slaughter of the innocents and recording the reference to the Micah passage about Bethlehem Ephratah, Matthew may be suggesting not only that the messiah has come but also that his coming, and not the earlier restoration of the temple under the Persians, is the true reward for Rachel's labor. We will develop this further when we discuss Jeremiah.

He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.

Micah 6:8

Here in summary form are the desiderata of God's imperative: justice, mercy, and humility. Habakkuk would encapsulate these three under the phrase "the just shall live by faith" (Habakkuk 2:4), or "the righteous shall act faithfully all his life." To act in a just manner, to love mercy, and to be humble before God is how the dictum in Leviticus 19:18: "Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" is to be lived out, and how one is to conform to the injunction in Deuteronomy 5:33 and 6:6: "Ye shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God hath commanded you, that ye may live, and that it may be well with you, and that ye prolong your days in the land which ye shall possess....And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might", passages which Jesus describes as the epitome of both the law and the prophets (Matthew 22:37 - 40).

While God's mercy to us is an expression of God's love to us, the passage here implies that our mercy to one another is an expression of our humility before God. If, as Isaiah tells us, "we are all as an unclean thing" (Isaiah 64:6), then we are all repellent to God and guilty before him. This recognition is the ground of our humility and at the least should caution us to be merciful to one another. In other words, doing justly should for us express our love of mercy. As suggested earlier, this does not mean we should adopt a free and easy "anything goes" attitude. It means instead that we should urge sinners to repentance and be delighted when they repent in the spirit that the prodigal's father explains to the young man's brother after that brother in his criticism of the proceedings has revealed his own proud and ungenerous heart, "It is meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found." (Luke 15:32)

The Pharisees as they appear in the New Testament do not love mercy. Their judgments express their delight in censure. It is important to remember here that our knowledge of right and wrong was gained in rebellion. Hence it is a knowledge shot through with sin. It is also the knowledge we must rely upon when we attempt to act like God and exercise judgment. Too often our judgments express one of two extremes. Either, like the Pharisees, our judgments reveal that we delight not in mercy but in censure, or else we pretend to express mercy by an appeal to a false humility that insists we should not judge at all. Scripture condemns the first extreme and offers no support for the second. It admonishes us instead to judge righteously. Our love of mercy and our humility before God are the qualities which invest our judgments with such righteousness as they have.

**Therefore I will look unto the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation:
my God will hear me.**

Micah 7:7

Having described the terrible times in which he lives, times in which evil men seemed to prosper, good men seemed to have perished from the earth, and trust had so collapsed that the prophet could say that "a man's enemies are the men of his own house" (Micah 7:6), Micah confesses his firm faith in the Lord. There are three things to notice about this confession. First, there is nothing heroic about it. Rather it is the mark of genuine faith. Despite sophomoric arguments to the contrary, the reality of evil does not undermine our faith. Rather it is an occasion for expressing faith. The faithful person gives thanks to God for blessings and in times of trial like the one Micah describes looks to God for deliverance.

Suffering abounds. It is a fact of our existence in this age. A "believer" who loses faith when touched by that suffering had no genuine faith to begin with. Instead of true faith such apostates

reveal a hardness of heart that could profess to delight in God when others suffered but abandoned God as soon as they experienced suffering themselves. Paul summed up true faith when he wrote:

I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, there with to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.

Philippians 4:11 - 13

Second, it is God to whom the faithful one turns for salvation. The prophet does not rely on his own strength for he knows he is a weak reed. The prophet does not rely on help from others for they are no stronger than he is and cannot be trusted. The idea that one can have a personal relationship with God and that consequent to that relationship one can call on God for aid in times of trouble and expect God to respond favorably is central to many religious traditions other than Christianity. It is an ancient idea and tells us something fundamental about human beings: human beings are those creatures who call on God for aid in times of crisis. And regardless of one's profession, it is not too much to say that the God one turns to in time of need is the God one truly trusts. Hence, when Ahaziah, king of Samaria, sent messengers to inquire of Baalzebub the god of Ekron, Yahweh judged him worthy of death (II Kings 1:2 - 3) and he died (II Kings 1:17).

Third, by assuming God has the power to save, faith assumes God can act in the universe. A model of the universe as closed to God's action is a model which is antithetical to Christian faith. The true faithful must assume that God can act in the universe he has created either indirectly by means of angelic messengers or directly by means of his own Holy Spirit. The prophets called directly on God for salvation and expected God to hear them and act. A universe opened to God is assumed in every prayer to God for deliverance.

Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity and passeth by the transgressions of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy.

Micah 7:18

Here the prophet celebrates God's character as merciful judge. God's judgments involve censure but God does not delight in censure. Instead God delights in mercy. This is not to say that God fails to take judgment seriously. God's judgment on sin left the ground cursed, engendered human suffering, and unleashed death upon humanity. All these elements in our existence are expressions of God's hatred of and revulsion toward sin. God does not express mercy by deciding that sin is not sinful. Instead, as Paul tells us, the law, which he describes as a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ (Galatians 3:24), was given to make sin exceedingly sinful (Romans 5:20; 7:13). Then having revealed through the law how truly sinful sin is, God, through the suffering and death of his son, provided a means of expressing mercy to those who respond in faith to Christ's offer of forgiveness. In this way God demonstrates the seriousness of sin, the cost of mercy, and his great love for us.

Notice, too, that it is only "the remnant of [God's] heritage" whose iniquity is pardoned. In Isaiah 10:22 the prophet speaks of a remnant of Jacob returning to God. Paul in Romans 9:27 quoting the Septuagint version of that passage interprets it to mean that a remnant of Israel shall be saved, that is shall come to Jesus, and in Romans 11:5 he recalls the story of God's reminding Elijah that he had reserved to himself seven thousand men in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal (I Kings 19:18) to illustrate his conviction that such a remnant existed according to the election of God. This would suggest that the Jews have no covenant of salvation apart from Jesus Christ. To understand why this is so, it is helpful to have a clear understanding of who the Jews were.

The word Jew is not found in the Old Testament until the end of II Kings. The KJV first uses the term in II Kings 16:6. The Hebrew word in that passage which is translated as Jew in the KJV is *Yehuwdie*. The context clearly shows that it refers to members of the tribe of Judah. Hence it is

rendered “men of Judah” in the NIV and the RSV and as “Judeans” by the ASV. In the seventeenth chapter of II Kings the Northern Kingdom, also known as Israel or Samaria for its capital built by Omri (I Kings 16:23 - 24), falls. After that event the KJV, ASV, and RSV all use the word Jews when translating *Yehuwdie* in II Kings 25:25 while the NIV still prefers “men of Judah”. The word Jew is also found in Jeremiah, in Esther, in Nehemiah, in Zechariah, and in Daniel. Each of these books is late, implying a late origin for the word Jew. In short Jew is a word which with the one KJV exception is not used in Scripture until after the fall of Samaria. This suggests then that the word Jew refers to a subset of the larger group Israelite. Israelites were descendants of Israel or Jacob. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are best understood not as Israelites nor as Jews but as Hebrews (Gen. 14:13; 39:14, 17; 41:12). The word translated as Hebrew is *'Ibriy*, derives from *'Eber* which means across or from the opposite side and usually refers to east of the Jordan River, and is the name of one of Abraham's progenitors (Genesis 11:16-26). Hence Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were Hebrews, descendants of Eber who lived east of the Jordan. Jew then primarily identifies a member of the tribe of Judah, the royal tribe of Israel and the largest of the two tribes of the Southern Kingdom, the other being Benjamin. It may in a secondary sense refer to members of both tribes (for example Paul who was of the tribe of Benjamin [Romans 11:1] could nevertheless refer to himself as a Jew [Acts 21:39]). When used currently it refers to a person whose religion is Judaism or whose cultural heritage and identity derives from Judaism.

Judaism itself began to take shape during the Babylonian exile as those deported from the Southern Kingdom reflected on their experience and tried to understand what had happened to them. Prior to the exile there had been two sets of prophets. One set assured the men of Judah and Benjamin that the temple would never fall as long as the sacrifices were conducted. The other set insisted that God demanded more than sacrifice, he expected everyone under the covenant to be obedient to all aspects of the Torah. After the temple fell the deportees recognized the second set of prophets as the true ones and wrote a history of their kingdom that interpreted events in light of that second prophetic vision. We have this history preserved in I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, and I and II Chronicles. When we realize that David and Solomon were of the tribe of Judah and that most of the writing prophets prophesied after the fall of Samaria, we begin to see that the Old Testament is an overwhelmingly Judean document. To fully appreciate what was occurring, it is important to recognize that these exiles understood themselves to be purifying their faith. This purification was being conducted apart from the temple and sacrifice. Hence this new faith demonstrated conclusively that it could not only survive without the temple and away from Jerusalem, it could be more pure than the faith which revolved around the sacrificial cultus. While the faith they developed was a modified form of the earlier faith insofar as it affirmed belief in one God, secured its relationship to that one God by means of the Torah, and understood its blessings in terms of its rights to the land promised to Abraham, it differed from the original faith insofar as it lacked the temple and the system of sacrifices. In place of the earlier sacrificial cultus this new faith substituted righteous works, prayer, and the study of the Torah. Those rabbis or teachers who were to become such central figures first appeared at this time as did synagogues. The Sabbath assumed an importance it had not had earlier (Leviticus 26:14, 27 - 35; II Chronicles. 36:21), and circumcision which had been practiced by the Egyptians and Canaanites but which was not practiced by the Babylonians became a central distinguishing feature for the adherents of this faith.

Once the Jews returned to Israel under Cyrus the Persian, temple sacrifice was reinstituted and Judaism began to proliferate into many forms. There were Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and a host of others. Initially Christianity was among these forms. After all Jesus was a Jew of the tribe of Judah and his original followers were Jews. But after the persecution of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1), Jewish Christians who had fled abroad began to share the gospel not only with other Jews but also with Gentiles (Acts 11:19-20). Since the Jews at a fundamental level understood themselves to be separate from Gentiles, this sharing of the news about the arrival of messiah created huge problems. One of the central issues addressed by Paul and one of the dominant themes in the book of Acts is how to relate these two groups.

In 70 AD as a consequence of a Jewish revolt against Rome, the temple in Jerusalem was again destroyed. The event was catastrophic for Judaism. Only two forms of the faith survived. One was embodied in the Christian tradition. Because of the unresolved debate over the relationship between Jews and Gentiles within Christianity, this tradition was largely abandoned to the Gentiles although small Jewish Christian enclaves did endure for several centuries. The other form derived from what are referred to in Acts 14:2 as unbelieving Jews. Some years after the fall of Jerusalem, the Roman emperor Vespasian who reigned from 69 - 79 AD allowed rabbi Johanan ben Zaccai, a Pharisee, to settle at Jamnia, a town in western Israel which had once been a center for the Philistines but which had been sacked by Judas Maccabeus and later rebuilt. It is possible that in doing this he was honoring a promise he had made to the rabbi during the siege of Jerusalem. Between 90 and 100 AD other unbelieving Jews held a council there and, building on their experience in the Babylonian exile, sought to purify their faith by reformulating it. They abandoned the Septuagint in favor of what was to become the Masoretic text, once again substituted works of righteousness, prayer and study of Scripture for the sacrificial cultus, and wrote synagogue ritual prayers which cursed Christians. As in the case of Babylon what they created was a new, though modified, form of the earlier faith. Today's Jews are the heirs of that council.

We have seen in this brief survey that the faith of the Hebrew people has not been uniform. Instead, their faith has assumed a variety of forms as the identity and circumstances of those people has shifted and evolved. Since the fall of the temple in 70 AD two versions of the earlier faith survived. One claimed to follow the expected messiah which it identified as Jesus. The other insisted the messiah had not yet come. John in Revelation twice refers to "the synagogue of Satan", a synagogue made up of those who say they are Jews but are not (Rev. 2:9; 3:9). John in I John also identifies those who deny Jesus is the Christ as liars and associates them with antichrist (I John 2:22). It is not too much to assume that he was referring to this group of unbelieving Jews.



Chapter Five: The Glory of Assyria and the Prophecy of Nahum

The murder of Sennacherib at the hands of his two sons in 681 BC heralded no reversal in Assyria's fortunes. Sennacherib's successor Esarhaddon (681 - 669 BC) not only marched into Egypt to defeat Taharka but also rebuilt Babylon, the city Sargon had subdued and Sennacherib had destroyed. Some historians have suggested that Esarhaddon's wife may have been Babylonian, a circumstance that, if true, could explain his desire to preserve that rival city. Whatever the reason for his interest in Babylon, Esarhaddon put Samassumukin, one of his sons, in charge of the province, and sent Manasseh there as a captive (II Chronicles 33:10 - 13). Then, while with his army in Egypt, Esarhaddon died at Harron in December 669 BC.

He was succeeded by Ashurbanipal (668 - 630) under whom Assyria reached the pinnacle of its power and glory. Ashurbanipal captured Thebes, the capital of Upper Egypt, in 663 BC. This was a severe blow to Judah since Judah had sought an alliance with Egypt against Assyria. Following his conquest of Thebes, Ashurbanipal put down a revolt by his brother Samassumukin, burning Babylon in 648 BC after famine had driven the city's defenders to cannibalism. As the city was in flames, Samassumukin immolated himself and possibly his family, though there is a tradition that his family escaped. But Ashurbanipal was more than a victorious military leader, he also had a keen interest in learning and amassed a great library at Nineveh, the first of its kind in the ancient Near East, thus helping to secure the city as a center of culture.

It was during the reign of Ashurbanipal or immediately following it, that is, during the height of Assyria's period of dominance, that Nahum (the name means "consolation" or "comfort" and is probably a contraction of a longer Hebrew term meaning "Yahweh is a comforter") prophesied Nineveh's destruction. Almost nothing is known of Nahum's life beyond that he was from Elkosh (Nahum 1:1), a settlement of uncertain location. There is a tradition that he lived in exile and prophesied in the vicinity of Nineveh but this is doubtful. It is more likely that Elkosh was in Galilee, that Nahum lived there during the Assyrian invasions of Samaria, and that, perhaps because of those invasions, he migrated to Judea where he lived at the time he prophesied. Such paucity of biographical material for contributors to Scripture is not unusual. They focus not on themselves but on their message.

Nahum's prophecy, though brief, is quite remarkable both for its historical detail and for the precise nature of what it reveals about the future. For example, Nahum 2:6 suggests that the Khasr River which ran through Nineveh would itself be instrumental in the city's fall. In fact, heavy rains caused the Khasr to flood, collapsing a section of Nineveh's walls and allowing the Medes to enter the city and capture it. It is within the context of this remarkable prophecy that we can best understand Nahum's view of God as both vengeful and faithful, the vision with which he opens the book.

God is jealous, and the Lord revengeth; the Lord revengeth, and is furious; the Lord will take vengeance on his adversaries, and he reserveth wrath for his enemies. The Lord is slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked; the Lord hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet.

Nahum 1:2 - 3

The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them that trust in him. But with an overrunning flood he will make an utter end of the place [i.e. Nineveh] thereof, and darkness shall pursue his enemies.

Nahum 1:7 - 8

We read in Exodus 20:5 that God is a jealous God by which is meant that he is intolerant of any rival or of any unfaithfulness to him. And we also read there that because he is jealous, God, when

dealing with his covenant people, will inflict the iniquities (or in Hebrew the *'avon*: the perversities or moral evils) of the fathers upon their children for three to four generations. That is to say that such evil as the fathers did will, under God's covenantal providence, exercise its influence not only over the ones who committed the sins but over their children, the children of their children, and beyond. This turning away from his people and leaving them in their sins for generations, expresses God's judgment on the sin of idolatry. Paul describes this action of God in Romans 1:20 - 24 when he says that although people knew God, they did not glorify him as God, but instead worshipped images. In consequence God gave them up to their sins. This turning away from his covenant people so that they can pursue idols is intended to illustrate both the futility of idols and the goodness of God. It illustrates the futility of by showing the idols' impotence in the face of rampant sin, and it illustrates the goodness of God by showing how adversely his absence effects his people.

But God's jealousy has another side. God is jealous not only of rival deities, he is jealous for his people when others seek to inflict harm upon them, and this is the jealousy Nahum is discussing. The story of David and Saul is illustrative here. Despite his many failures, Saul was God's anointed, therefore David was careful to do Saul no harm despite Saul's many attempts to kill him. David sought Saul's good because David feared God and did not wish to provoke God's jealousy. Nahum suggests at the beginning of his book that those who are the enemies of God's people are the enemies of God and that God will respond to outrages committed against them in the same way he would respond to sins committed against his own person. This does not mean that God will not use the ungodly to chasten his chosen ones, but it does mean that when the ungodly are used as God's chastening rod, they are themselves jeopardized by the temptations they discover in their temporary authority. Speaking through Zechariah centuries later God would say:

And I am very sore displeased with the heathen that are at ease: for I was but a little displeased, and they helped forward the affliction.

Zechariah 1:15

In other words, where God in his displeasure would have exercised loving sternness, the instruments God used betrayed God's purposes and were cruel. In this way they revealed not only God's authority over all people, they displayed their own iniquity, and earned God's harsher judgment.

It is often observed that Hell is an idea found more clearly a New Testament than in the Old, but Hell certainly latent in the judgments pronounced by the prophets. If God will tolerate no rival, if God's jealousy is the cause of his seeking revenge against his adversaries, if God is furious with his enemies, if because of that divine wrath he will, with darkness and overwhelming flood, make an utter end to those enemies, and if the ones who provoke his jealousy are unrepentant idolaters and those who seek to harm his people, then surely the reality of Hell is strongly implied in these words of Nahum.

Note, too, that God's mercy (he is slow to anger) is also proclaimed as is his goodness to those who trust him. This shows us then that God's goodness and mercy and the reality of Hell are not mutually exclusive. Instead they are complementary aspects of God's personhood. Indeed, we can say that the reality of Hell, like the willing sacrifice of God's Son, underlines the depth and purity of God's love. Even as the love shared between the three persons of the godhead can brook no rival, so the love God offers to humanity cannot be finally rejected without eternal consequences. God made us for his glory and in the end all people will glorify him even if many of them are unaware of it or do not intend it. God has offered some of us the privilege of being called his children and experiencing his love forever. Those who finally reject such an offer and bind themselves instead to stocks, stones, and the vagaries of their own desires have by their choice elected selfishness over altruism, hatred over love, ignorance over knowledge, foolishness over wisdom, ugliness over beauty, crippledness over wholeness, and evil over good. They deserve God's wrath and our contempt.

Behold upon the mountains the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace! O Judah, keep thy solemn feasts, perform thy vows: for the wicked shall no more pass through thee; he is utterly cut off.

Nahum 1:15

Nahum's words are very similar to a passage in Isaiah which reads:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings,
that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation;
that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!

Isaiah 52:7

Paul quotes the Isaiah passage in Romans 10:15 when describing the importance of mission work, the sending of believers to share the gospel with those who have not heard. In both the Nahum and Isaiah passages, those bringing the good news are proclaiming the defeat of a terrible enemy which had ravaged though not defeated Judah. As Isaiah put it, the Assyrian had oppressed them without cause (Isaiah 52:4). Now that enemy had been crushed, not by Judah but by another, and Judah is called to rejoice over the destruction of her foe. Paul, by referring to the Isaiah and Nahum passages, shows us that this is like the victory we have in Christ Jesus. He has defeated those enemies who oppressed us for no cause other than their hatred of God. And he bids us celebrate our freedom from their tyranny and to rejoice in his triumph.

The destruction of Nineveh and Nimrud (Assyria's military capital under Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II on the east bank of the Tigris River twenty-five miles south of Nineveh) in 612 BC did not immediately result in the fall of Assyria. The Assyria armies continued their struggle against Babylon for seven more years. But with their defeat at Haran in 609 and finally at Carchemish in 605 the might that had been Assyria was broken forever. The collapse of Nineveh's defenses occasioned by the flooding of the Khasr had sparked a series of events that were irreversible. Nineveh, once a lion among the nations, fell fourteen years after Ashurbanipal's death. It was never rebuilt. Instead it became a pasturing place for sheep and its citadel mount, known today as Tel Kuyunjik, means "mound of many sheep".



Chapter Six: Zephaniah, Habakkuk, and the Rise of Babylon

Babylon is first mentioned around 2300 BC when it served as a provincial center under the third dynasty of Ur. In 1894 BC it became the capital of a small kingdom set up by an Amorite monarch named Sumuabum. Hammurabi (1792 - 1750 BC) made the city the seat of an empire that covered southern Mesopotamia and what is now northern Iraq. Babylon was conquered by the Kassites in 1595 BC and, though briefly held by Tukulti-Ninurta I of Assyria in 1234, was controlled by the Kassites until 1158 BC when it was sacked by the Elamites. Like Hammurabi, Nebuchadnezzar I (1124 - 1103 BC) exercised dominion from Babylon, but from the ninth to the seventh centuries BC the city became, as we have seen, part of the Assyrian empire. However, by the middle of the seventh century, Babylon, conscious of its own imperial past under Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar I, was becoming restive, and, as Egypt under Psammetichus I broke free of Assyrian control in 654, that restiveness looked likely to bear fruit. The Assyrians certainly had their hands full during the seventh century. In addition to rebellions, the nomadic and warlike Scythians, outstanding horsemen whose homeland was on the northern shores of the Black Sea, invaded Assyria, raiding as far south as Palestine.

With Samassumukin, Ashurbanipal's brother, as its leader, Babylon revolted against Assyria, as we saw in the last chapter, and was burned in 648 BC. After Ashurbanipal's death in 630, the city rebelled again in 627 under Samassumukin's successor Kandalanu, but Babylon's independence was not finally secured until Nabopolassar successfully met an Assyrian force marching to the Assyrian city of Nippur located between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers sixty miles southeast of Babylon. As a consequence of his victory he was recognized as king of Babylon on November 22 -23, 626 BC.

Four years later in 622 Nabopolassar conquered Nippur and from the city was able to control river traffic that connected major Assyrian cities like Carchemish, Haran, Ashur, Nimrud, and Nineveh itself to the Persian Gulf. In 616 BC he renewed his pressure on the Assyrians, pushing them as far north as Haran, a city east of the Euphrates. In response the Assyrians forged an alliance with Egypt but despite this alliance, the Median ruler Cyaxares, aided by the Babylonians, captured the Assyrian city Ashur in 614 BC. This victory led to a formal Medo-Babylonian alliance that was sealed by a marriage.

After Nineveh and Nimrud fell in 612, Ashurballit, the new Assyrian king, reorganized his forces at Haran. In 609 BC Nabopolassar with the assistance of Umman-manda troops (identified by some historians with the Scythians, by others with the Medes) defeated a combination of Egyptian forces led by Necho and Assyrian forces led by Ashurballit at Haran. The Egyptians withdrew to Carchemish and Ashurballit pulled back to the west bank of the Euphrates. Failing in his attempt to recapture Haran, Ashurballit retreated north to Urartu, one of the first regions conquered by Assyria, and the remnants of the once mighty Assyria empire faded from history.

In 607 BC Nabopolassar resumed his attack on the Egyptian forces stationed on the upper Euphrates, conducting several raids against them until 605 BC when he turned the command of his army over to his son Nebuchadnezzar II. Nebuchadnezzar II captured Carchemish in the early summer of 605, then again defeated the Egyptians at Hamath as they retreated. By August he was in control of Syria and Palestine, having driven the Egyptians back to Egypt. On August 15/16 Nabopolassar died and Nebuchadnezzar hurried to Babylon where he was crowned on September 6/7, the same day he arrived. Under his rule, which lasted until 562, Babylon became a major imperial power.

At approximately the time Nabopolassar was winning Babylon's independence, two prophets in Judah were proclaiming God's word to a people who would watch and later experience the turbulence as one imperial power died and another was born. Those prophets were Zephaniah and Habakkuk.

Section A: Zephaniah

The name Zephaniah has been translated as meaning “Yahweh has treasured”, “Yahweh has hidden”, “Yahweh has treasure (hidden)”, “the Lord treasured”, or “the Lord protected.” According to the first verse in his book, he prophesied during the reign of Josiah, the reforming king who was slain in an attack he launched against Pharaoh Necho in 609 as the latter marched north to aid Ashuruballit at the battle of Haran.

The genealogy for Zephaniah is unusually long for a prophet and lists Hezekiah (the KJV renders the name Hizkiah but the RSV, the NIV, and the ASV all say Hezekiah) among his ancestors. As Hezekiah is not a common name, its presence suggests to some commentators that Zephaniah may have been a direct descendant of the king, meaning that he was of the tribe of Judah. On the other hand, other commentators have suggested that Zephaniah the prophet and Zephaniah the priest mentioned in II Kings 25:18 - 21 and Jeremiah 52:24 - 27 are the same. If so, that would mean that Zephaniah was of the tribe of Levi. However, because Zephaniah the priest is identified in Jeremiah 21:1 as being the son of Maaseiah whose name does not appear among the prophet’s progenitors, and as he was captured by the Babylonian captain of the guard and deported to Riblah where he was slain, a fate which Jeremiah, who enjoyed the favor of the Babylonians, was spared, it is unlikely that the priest and prophet can be identified. As Zephaniah the prophet seems quite familiar with Jerusalem (a characteristic he shares with Isaiah who may also have been of royal descent), it seems that of the two suggests, the identification of Zephaniah as a great great grandchild of Hezekiah is more likely correct. And as he was probably senior to Jeremiah, it is quite possible that he died sometime prior to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

The literary style Zephaniah employs is called a *ginah*, a five beat line of poetry often used in funeral songs. Like so many of the prophets, he begins with a message of judgment and ends with a message of consolation and hope for those who remain faithful to the Lord.

Therefore wait ye upon me, saith the Lord, until the day that I rise up to the prey: for my determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them mine indignation, even all my fierce anger: for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy. For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may call upon the name of the Lord, to serve him with one consent. From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suppliants, even the daughter of my dispersed, shall bring mine offering. In that day shalt thou not be ashamed of all thy doings, wherein thou hast transgressed against me: for then I will take away out of the midst of thee them that rejoice in thy pride, and thou shalt no more be haughty because of my holy mountain.

Zephaniah 3:8 - 11

This passage summarizes Zephaniah’s message. Three things about it should strike us. First, the depiction of the earth being destroyed by the fire of God’s jealousy calls to mind Peter’s words to us:

But the day of the Lord shall come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.

II Peter 3:10

In apocalyptic writings, fire often plays a dominate role in the final destruction of this age. While some have argued that such a figure may have been derived from Babylonian and/or Greek

traditions, it seems more likely that, rather than introducing a new image, any borrowing from the pagans which might have occurred served to modify the already well established concept of God as jealous. Hence, when Peter talks of the elements melting and the works in the earth being burned up, he probably has in mind passages like this one in Zephaniah which describe God's jealousy in fiery terms.

Second, God is promising to gather the nations, that is the *goy*, to pour out his wrath upon them for the purpose of giving a pure language to the people, that is the '*am*', a word which as we see in Zephaniah 3:20 refers to both Jews and the *goy*, that is the Gentiles. The phrase recalls the picture of Isaiah's lips being touched with a live coal held by one of the seraphim (Isaiah 6:6 - 7) or God's promise through Hosea that he will win his own back and take the names of the Baali out of their mouths (Hosea 2:16 - 17). The problem of the nations is the problem of idolatry. All their sins are spawned from this one. God at Babel corrupted their languages and in judgment upon them has hardened their hearts. But a central purpose of the final judgment along with punishment is purification. He chastens to instruct and to bring his own to him, even from the farthest regions, to serve him with one consent.

Third, Zephaniah's reference to the proud and haughty being taken away reminds us of Christ's words on the Mount of the Beatitudes that the meek shall inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5). If the problem of the nations is idolatry, the root of idolatry is pride. The holy mountain, as we have seen, is Golgotha. There pride is swept away along with shame as the prophet rather surprisingly suggests. Instead of shame we find joyful reunion. In place of the haughty we find the meek. And the earth, restored, will be given to them.

Section B: Habakkuk

Habakkuk (the name means "one who embraces") was probably contemporary with Jeremiah but nothing of certainty is known of his life. While it has been suggested on the basis Habakkuk 3:19 that he was a musician in the temple, the supposition is extremely tenuous. Although Habakkuk questions God in the spirit of Job and is the first prophet to do so, his book is in fact a theodicy, that is a vindication of the goodness of God in respect to the existence of evil. Habakkuk is concerned because God is using less righteous nations to punish Judah, a nation which, despite all its failings, is nevertheless more righteous than other nations if only because some Judeans had not "bowed the knee to Baal." Besides as a nation in covenant with Yahweh, Judah knew God, and had the law and the temple, key hallmarks of righteousness. In the end, Habakkuk confesses confidence that despite appearances, God is in control and will vindicate his own, that is those who remain faithful. The book despite its brevity contains four very famous passages.

Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by faith.

Habakkuk 2:4

The one whose soul is lifted up is filled with pride and, as the prophet says, is not upright, i.e., not righteous. In contrast, the just person lives by faith.

Live in the Hebrew is *chayah* which means to be nourished, to be kept alive, to be given or promised life, to be restored. Live in the Septuagint version as quoted by Paul in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11 is *zao* which means simply to live or to be alive. The use of shall in both cases means that the verbs are in the first person and denote simple future time. Hence, living which perseveres apart from tangible benefits is what is suggested. Such faith is meek faith since it is patient and submissive.

The Septuagint renders faith in the Habakkuk passage as *pistis*, a Greek word which denotes personal persuasion, belief, or conviction. In the Hebrew text faith is '*emunah*' which denotes firmness, trustworthiness, or fidelity. Hence the Hebrew says that the trustworthiness of the just one

will nourish him, restore him, or keep him alive, while the Greek says that the just person will be alive through belief. Faith in the Hebrew context assumes the covenantal precondition of the Sinai law, and reflects that assumption in its requirement that the person under the covenant be willing and able to fulfill the terms of that law. Faithful living is what is important. As is stated in Leviticus 18:5: "Ye shall therefore keep my statutes, and my judgments: which if a man do, he shall live."

The Septuagint translators would have also assumed the primacy of the Sinai covenant, but the Greek they used implies belief over action. Paul capitalized on the Greek implication and wedded it to belief as found in Genesis 15:6: "And he [Abraham] believed in the Lord; and he [the Lord] counted it to him [Abraham] for righteousness." The Hebrew word for belief here is '*aman* from which is derived the word amen. In effect the Genesis writer is saying that Abraham "amened" the Lord. He trusted God completely and said, "So be it." In Greek the word used in the Genesis 15:6 passage is *pisteuo* from *pistis* which means belief or trust. Paul was able to take *pistis* in the Habakkuk passage, relate it to *pisteou* in the Genesis passage and reinterpret Habakkuk as meaning belief rather than obedience to the law. While this move could be defended using only the Hebrew text, it is much plainer in the Greek Septuagint.

Using this redefinition of faith as belief Paul attacks the Judaizers, those who insisted that converts to the messiah must become obedient to the Sinai law. Paul clearly is concerned to contradict the "circumcision party" in his letter to the Galatians. In his letter to the Romans those being addressed in Romans Chapter Seven are not only believers as both Augustine and Luther insisted, but probably Jewish believers, believers who in the revealing phrase in Acts 21:20 numbered "many thousands of Jews...which believe; and they are all zealous of the law." In both Galatians and Romans Paul insists that fellowship with Christ is secured by faith after the fashion of Abraham not obedience to the law after the fashion of Moses.

**For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as
the waters cover the sea.**

Habakkuk 2:14

Faith to be effective cannot be blind, it must be informed. We must, as Paul reminds us, know who we have believed and be persuaded that he is able to keep until the end what has been committed to him (II Timothy 1:12). God's creation, the psalmist tells us, glorifies God (Psalm 19:1), but in a world where people have turned willfully from the truth and then been made deaf and blind, knowledge of God's glory is dimmed. Here God tells the prophet that the earth shall once again have knowledge of God's glory, only this time it shall be knowledge born of God's chastisement. It shall be a knowledge bracketed by woe. Those who will not glorify God as creator will glorify him as judge.

But the Lord is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him.

Habakkuk 2:20

In *The Idea of the Holy* first published in English by the Oxford University Press in 1923, the German theologian Rudolf Otto has a section on the numinous quality of silence, a section he begins by quoting this passage from Habakkuk. Professor Otto believes that if regarded in a merely historical way, the admonition to silence probably expresses a (primitive) fear of using words of evil omen, but that it also is a spontaneous response to the presence of holiness. In Appendix VIII of the book he analyses silent worship and, again beginning with this passage from Habakkuk, describes what he calls the threefold character of such worship: silence as sacrament, silence as waiting, and silence as communion.

At the beginning of the eighth chapter of Revelation after the seventh seal is opened, there is silence in heaven for half an hour, and, like the silence described by Habakkuk, this silence, too,

follows judgment and destruction. Doubtless Professor Otto is correct to point out that silence expresses profound worship, but here one finds worship that is not only reverent but chastened. One suspects that the majesty of such silence is a little eerie, a little numinous. It is the chilling silence one experiences after great storms or great battles, the silence of awe, the silence of survivors.

Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hind's feet, and he will make me to walk upon my high places.

Habakkuk 3:17 - 19

To begin to grasp just how radical a statement of faith this culmination to Habakkuk's beautiful hymn or psalm is, we should remember that, according to the Mosaic covenant, obedience was to be rewarded with prosperity (Leviticus 26:3 - 13; Deuteronomy 28:1 - 14), and, as theirs was an agrarian society, prosperity was symbolized as agricultural abundance. This condition within the covenant, a condition intended to illustrate God's goodness, his care for his people, and their dependence on him, was perverted by God's followers who, because of it, began to think of God primarily in terms of the material benefits he could bestow. They came to understand their relationship with God not as an end in itself (that is as the highest good) but as an alternative means of securing peace and plenty. In the eighth chapter of his *Commentary on Romans*, Martin Luther distinguishes between three classes of faith: the faith of the elected who do not murmur against God, the faith of those who in their hearts wish to be satisfied even should God reject them, and the faith of those who are willing to embrace condemnation should God reject them. This last, says Luther, is the most pure faith. It is toward this level of faith Habakkuk is reaching.

Like Zephaniah, Habakkuk watched his familiar world, riven by the clash of mighty armies, assume a new and sinister configuration as the established order was overturned, and as God himself raised up the Chaldeans, "that bitter and hasty nation [to] march through the breadth of the land [and] possess the dwelling places that [were] not theirs" (Habakkuk 1:6). Habakkuk could assume that this terrible, dreadful (1:7), violent (1:9), and arrogant (1:10) people was ordained for judgment and established for correction and that God's chosen would not die (1:12), but he wondered how a good God could look upon the deeds of the unrighteous and, rather than discipline them, use them as instruments of his own judgment (1:13). Pondering this mystery that God strengthened the more wicked to punish the less wicked threatened the prophet's sense that God was good. God answered Habakkuk (2:2), pledging to punish the Chaldeans' idolatry. (Remember that idolatry at root, because it confuses the creature with the creator, is a refusal to honor God as creator.) In response Habakkuk penned his magnificent poem of faith. Because God assured Habakkuk that he would punish wickedness, all wickedness, Habakkuk knew that he could trust God as a source of strength that went far beyond the mere provision of abundance. God was righteous creator and in that capacity could strengthen Habakkuk in the ways of righteousness, a righteousness that would allow the prophet and all the faithful to rejoice in the presence of God. In return for obedience, God was offering himself. That was the true abundance.



Chapter Seven: Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Fall of Jerusalem

Between 609 when Josiah was killed at Megiddo by Pharaoh Necho II as the latter, who had assumed the throne in Egypt the year before, marched toward his own defeat by Nebuchadnezzar II, and 597 when Nebuchadnezzar II captured Jerusalem for the first time, Judah was a vassal state of Egypt. After Josiah's death, his son Jehoahaz ruled Judah for three months before being deposed by Necho and taken to Riblah in the land of Hamath on the Orontes River in Syria. There he was put in chains, then removed to Egypt where he died (II Kings 23:33 - 34). Necho II replaced Jehoahaz with Eliakim, one of Josiah's sons, changing his name to Jehoiakim to symbolize his vassalage to Necho. Necho II also levied a heavy impost of gold and silver against Judah and demanded Jehoiakim raise the tribute through taxation (II Kings 23:34 - 35).

In 605 after defeating Necho II at Carchemish, Nebuchadnezzar II, while driving Necho's forces back to Egypt, entered Palestine and made Jehoiakim his own vassal. It was at this time that Daniel along with other youths who were members of Judah's nobility was taken captive by Ashpenaz, Nebuchadnezzar's chief eunuch, and transported to the land of Shinar where they were taught the language of the Chaldeans (Daniel 1:1 - 4). According to Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book X, Chapter 6, verse 87, Necho, though bottled up in Egypt (II Kings 24:7), was still powerful enough to influence Jehoiakim to stop paying tribute to Nebuchadnezzar. Jehoiakim suspended payment for several years, resuming it only when Nebuchadnezzar was preparing to invade Egypt and threatened war with Jehoiakim if the tribute were not forthcoming.

In 601 Nebuchadnezzar II invaded Egypt, withdrawing only after an indecisive encounter with Necho II during which both sides suffered heavy losses. Jehoiakim, emboldened by Nebuchadnezzar's set back, rebelled, a move which left him harassed by not only by the Chaldeans but by other surrounding kingdoms (II Kings 24:1- 2). Nebuchadnezzar spent 600 BC replacing his losses from the Egyptian campaign and in 599 fortified Riblah, Hamath, and other areas in the western Syrian desert. Jehoiakim died in late 598 or early 597 (the date of his death is occasionally given as December 6-7, 598) and was succeeded by Jehoiachin. In early 597 Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem. Jehoiachin capitulated in three months (probably sometime in mid-March) and was replaced by his uncle Mattaniah whose name was changed to Zedekiah (II Kings 24:8 - 17).

Zedekiah ruled eleven years, rebelling against Nebuchadnezzar in 590. The king of Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem beginning in mid-January 588. Save for a brief respite when the Babylonians moved against Egypt, this siege remained unbroken until the city fell in 586. Zedekiah was captured at Jericho when he tried to flee and brought to Riblah for judgment where he watched his sons being killed before he himself was blinded and taken in chains to Babylon (II Kings 25:1-7). Gedaliah was named governor of Judah, then assassinated by Ishmael after which many Jews fled to Egypt for fear of reprisals by the Chaldeans (II Kings 25:22 - 26). Reprisals did come. There was very likely a third deportation in 582 consequent to the murder.

During this very turbulent period beginning with the death of Josiah and ending with the fall of Jerusalem, two prophets spoke God's word to two different populations of Jews. Jeremiah proclaimed God's purposes to the Jews in Jerusalem while Ezekiel was the first prophet of the exile.

Section A: Jeremiah

Often called "the weeping prophet" because of the tears he shed for Jerusalem (Jeremiah 9:1; 13:17), Jeremiah was a descendant of Abiathar the priest who had been banished to Anathoth (a town about two miles northeast of modern day Jerusalem which had been given to the Levites for their inheritance - Joshua 21:18) by Solomon because of his support for David's son Adonijah when Adonijah tried to assume the throne (I Kings 1:5-7; 2:26 - 27; Jeremiah 1:1). Jeremiah's ministry is generally considered to have begun in 627 BC prior to King Josiah's reforms. We know that he was

only a youth when he was called (Jeremiah 1:6, some commentators assume him to have been approximately 20 years old). A great deal about the prophet's life is recorded in his book. During Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem from 588 until the city fell, Jeremiah consistently encouraged the people to capitulate to Babylon, the power he described as God's battle ax (KJV), God's hammer (RSV), God's war club (ASV, NIV), and understood as an instrument of God's will to be discarded when God was finished with it (Jeremiah 51:60 - 64). After the fall of Jerusalem, the Babylonians offered him the option of going to Babylon or anywhere else he might choose. Jeremiah elected to stay in Jerusalem, but following the assassination of Gedaliah (Jeremiah 41:1 - 3) he was forcibly taken to Egypt by other Jews who feared Babylonian reprisals (Jeremiah 43:4 - 7). There is no record of his death but he probably died in Egypt.

The book he left is a collection of poetic oracles, memoirs, prose narratives about life during the time Jeremiah lived, and prose speeches. This collection is not in chronological order. The absence of chronological order in the main body of the prophecy can complicate the exegete's task, but the real problem presented by Jeremiah is posed by the two somewhat different versions we possess.

The existence of these two versions, the Septuagint Jeremiah and the Masoretic version, is not a new discovery. The Septuagint, which is still the version used by the Eastern Orthodox Church, is the oldest Old Testament translation from Hebrew. It was rendered into Greek in Egypt probably in Alexandria and was begun perhaps as early as the third century BC. According to tradition seventy men working separately came up with exactly the same translation (hence the Septuagint meaning seventy and symbolized by the Roman numeral LXX for seventy), but in fact companies of translators worked at the task until 132 BC. The Septuagint as we have already seen is the version most often referred to in the New Testament and was the authority for the early church. As late as the fifth century Augustine in his *City of God* (written between 413 and 426) defends it as the standard version Christians use (Book XVI, chapter 10) and insists that it along with the Hebrew version is inspired by God though both differ in places from one another (Book XVIII, chapter 43). He further argues that the Septuagint and the Hebrew text when taken together capture the full meaning of what God wanted to say (Book XX, chapter 30).

The Western Church, both Catholic and Protestant, base their Old Testament on the Masoretic texts, so named after a group of Jewish scholars known as Masoretes who, from the beginning of the seventh century AD into the tenth century, edited the various Hebrew texts they possessed in an attempt to recreate the original version and resolve controversies that had emerged due to divergent textual renderings. In part the Western Church's preference for the Masoretic version goes back to Jerome who when he translated the Vulgate relied on the Hebrew version rather than the Greek.

Both of these textual traditions have great antiquity and fragments from both have been found at Qumran.

This is significant for our consideration of Jeremiah because in the case of Jeremiah there are some important differences between the Septuagint and the Masoretic versions of the two texts. The Masoretic version of the book is about one-eighth longer than the Septuagint version (that is it has about 2,700 more words). Passages found in the Masoretic version but not in the Septuagint are as follows: 33:14 - 26; 39:4 - 13; 51:44b - 49a; and 52:27b - 30. Furthermore the two versions are somewhat differently arranged. For example, chapters 46 - 51 in the Masoretic text are found in the middle of the Septuagint.

Some scholars have suggested that the Septuagint version of Jeremiah may have been intentionally abbreviated but most scholars doubt this. It is not known what purpose such an abbreviation would have served, and abbreviation as a practice among Jews is unknown. The point after all was accuracy of translation and where changes were made they tended to be changes involving added words, dropped words, miscopied words, or glosses which became incorporated into the text, but not intentional abbreviation.

We looked at ten passages from Isaiah. We will look at sixteen from Jeremiah.

Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.

Jeremiah 1:5

Here God reveals to Jeremiah that he had purposed the prophet's mission for him from before his birth. One finds similar claims made for Isaiah (Isaiah 49:1, 5), Cyrus (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1), John the Baptist, and Paul (Galatians 1:15). Such claims, by which the prophets assert their authority, are predicated upon God's role as creator. That role undergirds God's providence and assures us that God remains in control. So complete is God's command over what he has made that he picks his servants prior to their births. It is not clear how God assures the cooperation of these chosen or to what extent they can resist God. When Isaiah was called, he was obedient (Isaiah 6:8). It is doubtful that Cyrus knew. Nothing is said of any struggles John the Baptist may have experienced before submitting to God's will. Paul appears to have resisted God for some period prior to his encounter with the risen Lord on the way to Damascus (Acts 9:5). Jeremiah, as we shall see later, indicates an inability to resist God. Whatever else we can conclude, it would seem doubtful, based upon the claim God makes here and upon assumptions derived from the doctrines of creation and providence, that any radically libertarian account of human freedom is defensible since it must in the end compromise the very sovereignty God is claiming. If we wish to defend some level of human freedom based on what we know from the revelation, a view more in keeping with some form of compatibilist account whereby God's creatures willingly choose their courses consequent to their circumstances and created natures seems the more productive scenario.

Your iniquities have turned away these things, and your sins have withholden good things from you.

A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land; the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so: and what will ye do in the end thereof?

Jeremiah 5:25, 30 - 31

One sometimes hears the question, "Why were Israel and Judah punished for the sins of their leaders?" The assumption giving rise to such a question, like the assumption behind the equally wrongheaded protest "Why do bad things happen to good people?", is that sin is largely a private matter and lacks a social component. As Christians we have developed a doctrine of Original Sin which helps us to understand the full impact of Adam's disobedience and the radical nature of the salvation offered by Christ. Jeremiah had no such doctrine. Instead he is describing systemic social evil. Addressing the people, the prophet proclaims that the good things they expected consequent to their covenant with God have been withheld, that instead curses have befallen them. And to forestall any protest in the spirit of the one offered by David, "Lo, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly: but these sheep [that is, the people smitten by the pestilence], what have they done?" (II Samuel 24:17), Jeremiah reminds the people that they are as guilty as the false prophets and the corrupt priests because they secretly applaud what those evil men do. Paul made a similar point when he described the depravity of idolaters

Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.

Romans 1:32

And as we have seen, the issue confronting the Jews in Jeremiah's day, the issue confronting the general population up to the time of Paul, and the issue facing us currently, is the issue of idolatry, that is our habit of putting a false god(s) in place of the true God. Paul Tillich used the expression "ultimate concern" to unmask the nature of our gods. Our ultimate concern, in the sense Tillich

meant it, is the concern which, lying within our ordinary concerns, impacts the entire structure of meaning and purpose in our life. Should that ultimate concern be anything less than God himself as he is revealed in Jesus Christ as recorded in the Bible, then we are idolaters.

Though the Christian faith has influenced many societies in various ways, there has never been a genuinely Christian society anywhere in the world. This means that social structures, because they help us survive and prosper in a world which, due to the curse of God, can be harsh even in its most benign moments, are rife with things which can become objects of ultimate concern for us. Sometimes these things take the form of religions like Buddhism, Islam, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Sometimes they take economic or political shapes. Sometimes society seduces and corrupts us by offering us “authentic existence” in the pursuit of our personal goals. The idols infesting society can be overt or subtle, and when we are in their thrall, they almost always delight us. As social beings living in a fallen world, we must be on our guard constantly against tendencies toward faithlessness, for a wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land. The leaders are corrupt, and the people love to have it so.

**They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly,
saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace.**

Jeremiah 6:14 (8:14)

A variation of this phrase is found in Ezekiel 13:10 where its import is the same. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel are concerned because some prophets are promising peace at a time when God is using war as an instrument of discipline.

Because prophets were so important in God’s ministry to his people, God addressed the problem of false prophecy very specifically. We read in Deuteronomy:

If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; thou shalt not harken unto the words of that prophet, or dreamer of dreams: for the Lord your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Ye shall walk after the Lord your God, and fear him, and keep his commandments, and obey his voice, and ye shall serve him, and cleave unto him. And that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death; because he hath spoken to turn you away from the Lord your God....

Deuteronomy 13:1 - 5a

When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him.

Deuteronomy 18:22

Two potential difficulties are raised in these passages. The first deals with the problem of a prophet whose predictions prove reliable but who uses his apparent authority to seduce his hearers away from the true God. As we have seen, idolatry was the cardinal sin. Because such a prophet was counseling idolatry, that prophet was to be put to death, as were all such who advocated service to “other gods” (Deuteronomy 13:6 - 11). Indeed, God reveals that since all things are in his hands, he himself is responsible for the false prophet’s success but is using that success to test the fidelity of his own people. The second difficulty deals with the problem of a prophet who speaks in the name of the true God but whose words fail to come true. That prophet is only presumptuous and can be ignored. In the passage we are considering, Jeremiah is referring to the second kind of problem. He tells us later that we can know the true prophets of peace when the peace they proclaim comes to pass (Jeremiah 28:9).

Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, even I have seen it, saith the Lord.

Jeremiah 7:11

In what is often called his temple sermon (7:1 - 15), Jeremiah reminds his hearers that even as the ark of the covenant was captured by the Philistines during the days when Eli's sons used their office as priests in Shiloh as an occasion to sin (I Samuel 2:12 - 17; and chapter 4), so God will use the Babylonians to destroy Solomon's temple because of the corruption of the priests which ministered in it. Jesus himself quoted these words from Jeremiah when he drove the money-changers from Herod's temple (Matthew 21:12 - 13). A second comparison between Solomon's temple and Shiloh ended in Jeremiah's arrest and calls for his death although he was subsequently released (Jeremiah chapter 26). Similar charges were leveled against Jesus, too (Matthew 26:61). As we saw in the introduction of this study, the Jews took threats against the temple with utmost seriousness. It should not surprise us that Stephen's hearers stoned him immediately after he compared Solomon's temple to a thing made by hands, that is an idol (Acts 7:41 - 50; the Jesus referred to in this passage as found in the KJV is Joshua).

Many of the Jews in Jeremiah's time were making a very fundamental conceptual mistake. They believed that it was the presence of the temple in Jerusalem and the ministry of their priests within it that protected them. They assumed that God because he was their God needed their sacrifices and worship in some way and because of his need would assure the permanence of his temple. They understood God's love of them not as a generous outpouring from God to undeserving people but as expressing some lack in God himself. The destruction of the temple in 586 BC and again in 70 AD would correct forever this misconception in its most basic form and transform the faith of the people who held it. But variations on this misconception persist in theologies which, to defend their intelligibility, posit some deficiency in God.

The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved. For the hurt of the daughter of my people am I hurt; I am black; astonishment hath taken hold on me. Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?

Jeremiah 8:22

God, provoked by the idolatry of the people (8:19) seems to have deserted Zion, the hill on which the temple of Solomon stood. "The daughter of my people" stands for Judah. Gilead (the name means rocky region) lay in the territory of Manasseh east of the Jordan. The Pisgah range runs through Gilead. As part of the Pisgah within that region one would find Peor (or Baal-Peor, *baal* means "lord" and peor means "cleft") where Balaam went with Balak to gaze upon the tribes of Israel (Numbers 23:28), and Mount Nebo from which Moses viewed the Holy Land (Deuteronomy 34:1). But not only was Gilead renowned for such famous sites, it was also known for the balm trees which grew there of the genus *Commiphora*, particularly *C. opobalsamum* and *C. meccanensis*, that yield a mixture of oil and resin believed to have healing properties and, because of its fragrance, used in perfumes.

The exact nature of the calamity in question is uncertain. Possibly the prophet is referring to a severe drought (see chapter 14). Whatever the exact focus, Jeremiah laments that no medicine or physician can be found to restore Judah. That the situation has become so dire fills him with pain, sorrow, and amazement.

One of the difficulties with the covenant binding God to the people of Israel was that in many ways it symbolized God's absence as much as his presence. The people had no direct access to God. Instead a priestly class administered in their name, but even when members of that priestly class entered the holy of holies which one could do once a year, he (always he) found it empty. Sin, which

defined human life even for those under the Mosaic covenant, could be dealt with only by animal blood and resolutions based on human will. Hence, failure, not success, dominated. With the advent of Christ, all that changed. The priestly class was eliminated, the blood of Jesus provided an effective and ever renewing substitute for animal blood, Christ's word of justification birthed a new reality in believers, and the Holy Spirit ministered to those called by Jesus. With the new advent, Jeremiah's question was answered. Now we can sing in the words of the spiritual, "There is a balm in Gilead."

Thus saith the Lord, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches. But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth: for in these things I delight.

Jeremiah 9:24

Paul, admonishing the Corinthians to practice humility, quotes this passage (I Corinthians 1:31). The church in Corinth was riddled with division caused in part by the member's different understandings of the knowledge Paul, Peter and Apollos had shared with them, caused in part by the member's lack of love for one another, but rooted, as is so often the case, in pride. The realization that we are all guilty before God, that in Christ God sought us out because we could not save ourselves, and that the one who sought and saved us had to die because it is our nature to love sin rather than righteousness, should be an awareness sufficient to cause us to put all pride to death. But Paul is not developing that realization into a doctrine of penance. Instead he is developing it into a doctrine of glory. Reading the passage in Jeremiah we can understand why. We are told to glory because God who delights in lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, delighted to save us. The crucifixion was not the culmination of some cosmic tragedy. Instead, according to the writer of Hebrews, "it became him [that is it was suitable, seemly, appropriate, fitting, in accord with God's gracious nature] ...to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings." (Hebrews 2:10)

When the seventy disciples returned to Jesus joyous that they were through the name of Christ able to subdue demons, Jesus told them not to rejoice in that but to rejoice that their names were written in heaven (Luke 10:17 - 20). He was reminding them not that the gift of power over demons had little value but that the gift of eternal fellowship with Christ himself was worth so much more. Like them, we should rejoice not in God's lesser gifts like wisdom, riches, or strength by which we so often seek to dominate one another. Not even the power we have been given over demons should give occasion for our rejoicing. Rather we should rejoice that we were given the gift of God's Son and, even more, that in giving us that gift, God delighted himself. Knowing what God has done, not just for me, but for all who come to him, should cause me to lose my pride - in rejoicing.

Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps. O Lord, correct me, but with judgment; not in thine anger, lest thou bring me to nothing.

Jeremiah 10:23 - 24

Jeremiah confesses that human purposes rest not with the individual but with God. Rather than serving as a justification for excusing sin, this knowledge is voiced with a plea that divine discipline, which is expected, will be administered without anger. There are echoes here of Micah 7:18 as well as a direct parallel with Psalm 6:1 and Psalm 38:1. Maccabeus and his followers voiced a similar sentiment when they recovered the temple desecrated by Antiochus and purified its sanctuary (II Maccabees 10:4). In other words, Jeremiah's prayer resonates with much Judean thought.

This suggests, as we indicated when discussing Jeremiah 1:5, that compatibilist models of human freedom are more accurate than are libertarian ones,¹ a proposition that, if true, would suggest that God's judgment has less to do with evaluating our "free choices" and more to do with shaping us into something God wants us to be. The prophet delineates two types of correction, one done in wrath, and the other done judiciously. Wrath brings destruction while a more measured judgment is intended for instruction. The author of Hebrews expressed the point this way:

Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin. And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons.

Hebrews 12:4 - 8

If thou hast run with the footman, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses? and if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of the Jordan?

Jeremiah 12:5

"The swelling of the Jordan" is translated as "the jungle of the Jordan" in the RSV, "the thickets by the Jordan" in the NIV, and "the thicket of the Jordan" in the ASV. The dense growth sheltering wild animals in the Jordan's bottom land is what is referred to.

In this oracle, Jeremiah begins with a lament, asking God why the wicked prosper and how long the land will suffer because of it (12:1 - 4). One might have expected God to respond to Jeremiah with words of encouragement. Instead God responds by telling Jeremiah that his present difficulties are a mild preparation for the difficulties he will face in the future. Things will become worse, God says, because God has forsaken his house and his heritage (12:7). The destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the remnant of the people were ordained in God's turning away from the sinful nation. As Luther in his *Commentary on Romans* put it in his discussion of Romans 1:24, God in his stern justice permits the sinner to break all the commands in order to punish him more severely, and his most severe punishment is to give the sinner up to the one God hates most: the Devil.

God does not always comfort us. His words of condemnation are as harsh as any in literature. The prophets and Jesus himself offer the bluntest rebukes. It is not uncommon today to hear arguments that the love of God negates the reality of Hell. Only with the most selective reading of the Scriptures can one defend such a proposition. When taken in its entirety, the Bible, particularly the New Testament, paints Hell as a very real place. God's judgment of sin in the Old Testament is characterized by slaughter, famine, and mayhem. God's judgment of sin is so complete that in the New Testament we discover that only the death of his Son can provide a sufficient propitiation. Indeed, as we saw, God's judgment of sin is so complete that God delights in such a propitiation.

Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also

¹ For this distinction I am grateful to David Basinger and David M. Ciocchi. In his article "Divine Control and Human Freedom: Is Middle Knowledge the Answer?" which appeared in the March 1993 issue of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* Prof. Basinger defines compatibilist models of human freedom as assuming that one has acted freely if one has decided what to do, even though external factors allowed no other decision (p. 56). By contrast David M. Ciocchi in his article "Reconciling Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom" which appears in the September 1994 issue of the *Journal of the Evangelical Society* defines libertarian models as assuming that the one who acts could always act differently than he or she actually does (p. 402).

do good, that are accustomed to do evil.

Jeremiah 13:23

One of the mistakes we often make regarding sin is to think of it simply as a habit to be overcome. This idea is very old. One associates it particularly with the Jews and Muslims, both of whom insist that salvation is ours to win by virtue of our adherence to divine law. But in the late fourth and early fifth centuries a Briton named Pelagius developed a similar doctrine from within the Christian context and taught it to aristocratic circles in Rome. Arguing that the moral law must be obeyed and that people were free to do so if they chose, Pelagius asserted that human beings had it within their own power to perfect themselves and win their salvation if they conformed to that law. His view meant that grace acted externally rather than internally and that sin, because it was primarily willful behavior, left the essential person untouched. Stressing as he did the salvific potential of the law, Pelagius tended to reduce the salvation offered by Christ to the good example he set, an interpretation which glorified God as creator at the expense of God as savior.

Pelagius' views became quite popular and caused a great deal of debate within the church. They were eventually condemned by a plenary council of about two hundred bishops who met at Carthage in 418, but because the movement Pelagius inspired was so diverse, variations on the themes he defended remained influential both in Britain and in southern Gaul. Pelagius, banished from Rome in 418 and barred from entering Palestine by the synod at Antioch in 424, disappeared into Egypt where he probably died. His great opponent was Augustine whose position was affirmed by the Synod of Orange in 529, but forms of Pelagianism have continued to attract adherents down through the centuries.

In this particular passage Jeremiah portrays sin as something with far deeper roots than a mere habit of the will. He sees it as a stain on the very being of the sinner, a stain which the sinner is incapable of washing away by his own effort. It is no more possible for evil doers to begin to do good than it is for people to change the tone of their skins or animals to change the markings on their coats. Something far more thorough than good intentions and New Year's resolutions is needed to exorcise the baleful influence of sin. What is needed is the new creation offered by Jesus (II Corinthians 5:17).

Thus saith the Lord; Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord. For he shall be like the heath in the desert, and shall not see when good cometh; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness in a salt land and not inhabited. Blessed is the man that trustedth in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is. For he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh, but her leaf shall be green; and shall not be careful in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit.

Jeremiah 17:5 - 8

"Maketh flesh his arm" means to make his arm strong. "The heath in the desert" refers to a wasteland overgrown with shrubs and is translated as "a shrub in the desert" in the RSV, "a bush in the wastelands" in the NIV, and "a bush in the desert" in the ASV. The thrust of the passage is that those who trust in people are cursed while those who trust in God will be blessed. Immediately we ask, "Why are those who trust in other people cursed? Would it not be more nearly the case to describe them as frequently disappointed?" The answer goes back to God as the creator and sustainer of the universe.

As the creator and sustainer of the universe, God is the ultimate source of life. Hence, to turn to God is to turn to life. But, as we have seen, sin has separated us from God, and sin affects all of us. Therefore, those who look to other people for salvation are looking for aid from those who themselves need deliverance from sin. Nor, as we saw above, can any individual find salvation

through personal effort. We cannot of ourselves bridge the gap sin has created because sin is not simply a habit of will, it is something that has infected us at the very core of our being. It is only through the ministry of Jesus the perfect one that the gap created by sin can be bridged. The only way we have access to God and life is through the Son, the *logos* who made all things (John 1:1 - 3; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2). In the salvation drama, God the creator is not exalted above God the redeemer, nor does God the redeemer pay some ransom demanded by God the creator. Rather God in his capacity as both creator and redeemer works for our salvation.

For this reason Jeremiah can say that those who trust in the Lord are truly blessed and will flourish as trees by a river flourish even during the drought. In the same vein Christ admonishes us to trust fully in God's provision, so much so that we are not even to worry ourselves over it. Those things are what the Gentiles seek. Our concern is with the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:25 - 34). Paul, writing to the church in Philippi from his prison cell, encourages them in a similar fashion (Philippians 4:4 - 7).

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?

Jeremiah 17:9

The Hebrew word translated as heart is *leb* from *lebab* meaning heart and hence indicative of the most inward organ. Thus *leb* although it, too, can mean heart is often used as a figure for one's feelings, one's will, even one's intellect. It can also be used to describe the very center of something. In other words heart in Hebrew is used very much as it is in English.

By speaking of "the heart", Jeremiah is referring to something universal. He is saying that our feelings, will, and intellect are from their very core deceitful and wicked, not deceitful and wicked without modifiers, but deceitful above all things, wicked to the point of being desperately so. He even suggests that the depths of such depravity are so great that we cannot fully know them. Here then we see another reason why those who put their faith in other people are cursed. No human being can be fully trusted. It is as through the desperately wicked put his trust into one who was deceitful above all things.

It is easy for us to imagine that this is not true. We have art, we have science, we have all the accretions of civilization. We appreciate the finer things. But a moment's reflection should serve to cast some doubt upon such assurance. Most of what we depict in secular art and all of what is depicted in non-Christian religious art is sinful. Hence art serves to glorify, or at the least mitigate, sin. Science by its very nature is an attempt to understand God's creation apart from God. In this way the model of the world science constructs seeks to shut God out from what he has made. Civilization itself, for all the genuine benefits it conveys, rests upon economic, political, and social structures that are exploitative of human beings, frequently cruelly so, and that often reveal their demonic sides. After all, the library amassed by Ashurbanipal at Nineveh was made possible by Assyrian ferocity, and, in the same vein, Philip Elmer-Dewitt in the October 30, 1989, issue of *Time* describes the stunning craftsmanship the Assyrians displayed as they worked into intricate and exquisite jewelry the stolen gold of those they skinned alive. Though the cultural achievements of the Assyrians, given the standards of the time, were extraordinary, they did nothing to temper the barbarism of those people.

Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved: for thou art my praise.

Jeremiah 17:14

The seventeenth chapter of Jeremiah, as we have seen, is an extraordinary exposition of the human dilemma. Created to be in relationship with God, we cannot be fully what we are outside that

relationship. Apart from God we are like shrubs in the desert. In relationship with God, we flourish like trees by the river.

Worship, the language by which we address God, is the truest expression of that relationship. Those who hope in God and praise him for that hope, worship God from their hearts, but the heart of sin stained and lost humanity is wicked beyond measure and continually deceives itself. What is needed is not only forgiveness but a cleansing of the kind Isaiah spoke of where our sins are washed away. What is needed, as Jeremiah tells us here, is healing. Healing and salvation for Jeremiah are closely associated. It was an association Christ underlined when he healed the man sick with the palsy. Because he has the power to heal, we can also know he has the power to forgive (Matthew 9:2 - 8).

Healing demonstrates restorative power over nature. Healing is the basis from which the new creation will be called forth. The occasional healing which still takes place today is an earnest on the promise of that new creation. It demonstrates the power of God to do as he has said. If all our prayers for healing are not answered in the affirmative, it is only because the time of the new creation is not yet. When the new creation comes, no more prayers for healing will need to be made. In the meantime those who are ill pray for healing, in the knowledge that such power rests with God, in the lively expectation that God will grant those prayers, in the submissive knowledge that he may justly not grant them now, and in the certainty that when all things are made new, we will be among them, whole, joyous, and forgiven.

**Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name.
But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I
was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay.**

Jeremiah 20:9

Earlier we questioned the extent to which God's chosen are able to resist God purposes. Here we see how God corrects such resistance, at least in the case of Jeremiah. Jeremiah was simply overwhelmed by virtue of God's superior endurance. This suggests that in part God prevails because he is the strongest of the contestants. How strong is that? Strong enough to create the universe and sustain all that is within it, including those who resist him. Strong enough to maintain that universe in unwearying consistency, not for moments, days, weeks, or a few years, but for eons. Strong enough to shape and hold the "cosmic stuff" in a space/time net he fashioned from nothing. Strong enough to bend to his own purposes the forces he called into being. It is this God Jeremiah in a moment of weakness sought to defy. Is it any wonder Jeremiah grew weary with forbearing and could not stay?

**Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous
Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and
justice in the earth. In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell
safely; and this is his name whereby the shall be called, THE LORD OUR
RIGHTEOUSNESS.**

Jeremiah 23:5 - 6

Though not specifically identified as such in the New Testament, this oracle is obviously of messianic import. The righteous Branch harks back to Isaiah 11:1:

**And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall
grow out of his roots:**

and points forward to Zechariah 3:8:

Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, thou, and thy fellows that sit before thee:

for they are men wondered at: for, behold, I will bring forth my servant the
BRANCH.

Jesse, referred to in the Isaiah passage, was the father of David and the grandson of Boaz who married Ruth. A rod is a symbol of authority, hence the rod which grows out of the stem of Jesse, that is out of Jesse's offspring, signifies a figure of authority. As Jesse was of the tribe of Judah and as Judah provided Israel with her kings, we can infer that Isaiah is describing a king. Jeremiah makes that identification explicit, calling the Branch a righteous King. This prophecy was probably delivered during the reign of Zedekiah, who owed his throne to Nebuchadnezzar. If so, its promise of a righteous king who would save Judah and under whom Israel would dwell safely, would have contrasted sharply to that weakened puppet ruler who was so far from executing judgment in the earth that he was unable to secure his own dominion in Jerusalem. Apparently the words of Isaiah and Jeremiah inspired hope among the exiles for Zechariah, when he addresses Joshua the high priest and Joshua's companions, seems confident that his reference to the BRANCH will be understood. Indeed he explicitly identifies that Branch as a servant of God. By the time of Zechariah, the Jews had learned their lesson concerning idolatry. Though graven images would again be set up in their temple, it would not be done by them. The Hasmoneans may have been harsh rulers (crucifixion was first practiced in Palestine under the reign of Alexander Jannaeus [103 -76 BC], the first Hasmonean to assume the title of king), but they did not worship the *baals*.

I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran: I have not spoken to them, yet they
prophesied.

Jeremiah 23:21

Earlier in our study of Jeremiah we saw how in the thirteenth and eighteenth chapters of Deuteronomy God described the signs for recognizing false prophets and the way those prophets should be dealt with when uncovered. We know that false prophets posed a serious problem in both Israel and Judah, and we know from the account Jeremiah has left us that they were especially prominent during the last days of Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem. Earlier in his book we read:

Then the Lord said unto me: The prophets prophesy lies in my name: I sent
them not, neither have I commanded them, neither spake unto them: they
prophesy unto you a false vision and divination, and a thing of naught, and
the deceit of their heart.

Jeremiah 14:14

In the twenty-eighth chapter of Jeremiah we can read of Jeremiah's confrontation with Hananiah and how that confrontation ended in Hananiah's death. Earlier the false prophets had promised peace. Now they were promising victory over Babylon, the restoration of the temple vessels, and the return of the captives in a period of two full years from the occasion they spoke (Jeremiah 28:2 - 4 and 11). In fact everything the false prophets promised was coming but not in the time frame they specified and therefore not in the way they led people to expect. King Zedekiah would not defeat Babylon and usher in that glorious era the false prophets described. Instead, Babylon would defeat king Zedekiah, destroy Solomon's temple, and take a second wave of Jews into exile. Forty-seven years would pass before Babylon fell to Persia in 539 BC and a full seventy years would pass before the exiles would be able to return to Judah with their temple vessels. In the interim their faith would be transformed and much of the history as we have it recorded in the Old Testament would be written. Theirs was a heavy lesson to learn, but they learned it, and in that learning peered more deeply into the mysteries of God than they would have had God done as the false prophets desired. Was the cost too high? It depends on how ardently one desires God and how much one wants to be whole. Everything comes with a cost. What we have at the end of each day costs us the entire day to get it. If we are willing to spend our precious days in the pursuit of vanities, why should we begrudge exchanging a few vanities for a deeper knowledge of God? The price can only be called too high if what is offered was available more cheaply, or if we hold in contempt what is offered. History reveals no alternatives so

we cannot know if there were less expensive ways for the Jews to have gleaned their knowledge of God. Therefore the first possibility has no real meaning. It is the second possibility then that actually confronts us when we ask the question. The cost is only too high if we value something more than God. But to value something more than God is to hold God in contempt. Hananiah did that and died (Jeremiah 28:16 -0 17). Jeremiah refused to do it and also died, but he died knowing what the false witnesses would never know and with a hope that secures only the faithful.

Thus saith the Lord: A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rahel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not.

Jeremiah 31:15

We have already referred to this passage when discussing Micah 5:2. The reference to Rachel (or Rehal as it appears in the KJV) is of course a reference to Jacob's favorite wife for whom he in effect served fourteen years. Ramah simply means "a hill". There are several places referred to as Ramah in the Old Testament, but the one intended here is probably the site *er-Ram*, a hilltop outside Jerusalem but within the territory allotted to Benjamin. The passage is a poetic depiction of Rachel, having emerged from her tomb, standing on a hilltop outside Jerusalem and lamenting loudly and bitterly for her children who are no longer there. The context of the passage suggests that her weeping is due to Judah's fall to Nebuchadnezzar's forces, but it is revealed in Matthew 2:18 as a prophetic reference to Herod's slaughter of children two years of age or younger who lived in Bethlehem and its purlieus. The revelation that what would appear to be a poetic interpretation of grief at the spectacle of the exile is in fact a prophesy about the slaughter of children should alert us to the hazards of interpreting Scripture, especially prophesy. Peter writes:

...no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For prophecy came not in old time by the will of man, but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.

II Peter 1:19 - 20

Obviously Peter is talking about genuine prophecy here, God-inspired words written by faithful people of God, and he is saying that that prophecy in the Scripture is not intended to be interpreted privately but only through the power of the Spirit who inspired it.

Matthew when he cites the Jeremiah passage uses what is called the *peshet* method. The *peshet* method or "this is that" is a common tool of interpretation intended to unlock the hidden meanings of apocalyptic literature but which can also be used to illuminate the import of any prophetic material where symbols are employed. An important idea lying behind *peshet* is the idea of the culmination of an age. The one who employs *peshet* is usually saying something like: "The prophets of old spoke of events in the distance future and cloaked those events in symbols. The time they spoke of is now. The symbols denote particular current events. *This symbol is that event.*" In other words, this is that. Hence *peshet* is a favorite approach of eschatological communities like the one represented by the authors of the scrolls found at Qumran, or the authors of the New Testament. The use of so much *peshet* in the New Testament should remind us that the church is a quintessential eschatological community. Because *peshet* can have no referent beyond the authority of the one using it (the texts themselves almost never describe what the symbols indicate), one who uses *peshet* is saying in effect, "I know this is that because God told me." It is a bold claim but the nature of prophecy is such that those who interpret it are claiming a level of inspiration on a par with those who spoke it.

As we indicated when discussing the Micah 5:2 passage, Matthew's use of the prophecies in Micah and Jeremiah together with Micah's use of the archaic term Bethlehem Ephratah seems to suggest that the coming of the messiah and not the restoration of the temple under the Persians is the true reward for Rachel's labor of grief. Otherwise it is not easy to see why a poetic image perfectly coherent as an interpretive trope for a catastrophic historical event would suddenly be unveiled as a prophetic reference for another event which, horrible in itself, was of far less historical significance.

We have also seen how after the fall of the temple in 70 AD, there were in effect two different communities claiming an authentic Jewish heritage, and both asserting the authority of the Old Testament as sacred texts. One, founded by ethnic Jews, identified itself by embracing the messiah and, via Abraham, universalizing Israel in the community of the church. The other, also founded by ethnic Jews, identified itself by re-embracing its exclusive history and culture and insisting that the messiah had yet to come. We have argued that if Jesus was in fact the messiah, then the first group was comprised of the true heirs of Judaism. Now we see that the *peshet* method used in the New Testament is one of the myriad ways that the church is revealed as an eschatological community. We may think of the church then as a trans-cultural, eschatological community which identifies itself by its recognition of and by its loyalty to the messiah as identified in the Old and New Testaments, a body of texts it recognizes as authoritative. It is this community which was the reward for Rachel's labor. The return of the exiles under the Persians was not the true "return from the land of the enemy" (Jeremiah 31:16). That phrase referred not just to Babylon but to what Babylon came to represent for all humanity: a multi-formed world system of commerce and conquest, glorious in appearance, sub-human in nature, idolatrous to its core.

Section B: Ezekiel

Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, in the fifth day of that month, as I was among the captives by the river of Chebar, that the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God.

Ezekiel 1:1

So begins the book of Ezekiel. The Chebar, as we know from Babylonian records where it is also mentioned, was in fact a canal. Directed southeast from the Euphrates above Babylon, it flowed through Nippur, then rejoined the Euphrates near the city of Erech. If we assume Ezekiel was using an orthodox calendar to date his vision, then that calendar must have been lunar based, its year commencing in the spring. "The fifth day of the fourth month" would be the fifth of Tammuz, a month which, beginning with the fourth new moon, would correspond from roughly mid-June to early July or from early July to the first days of August. If we knew what "the thirtieth year" referred to, it might be possible to calculate the exact day of Ezekiel's vision, but unfortunately we do not. The thirtieth year could refer to the thirtieth year of the exile, but which exile, the first in 605 when Ezekiel and Daniel along with others were taken to Babylon, or the second in 586 when Jerusalem was captured and the temple destroyed? Either way the first verses would have to be a preface indicating the time that the book was completed. But a straightforward reading suggests that instead "the thirtieth year" refers to the time the book was begun. Therefore it is more likely a reference to Ezekiel's own age, or else a reference to the year he was called to be a prophet (i.e. thirty years after he was called), or to some other specific event like Josiah's reform, or Nebuchadnezzar's accession to the throne, or the independence of Babylon under Nabopolassar. Despite such uncertainties, which are by no means uncommon in ancient literature, Ezekiel has some of the best chronological references in the Bible. Only three dates (Ezekiel 26:1; 29:17; 33:21) appear to be out of order. In other words, Ezekiel begins at the beginning and ends at the end.

Ezekiel's name means "the strength of God (*el*)" or "God (*el*) will strengthen". We know from 1:3 that Ezekiel was a temple priest and hence of the tribe of Levi. If the thirtieth year refers to the date of his birth, he was probably around twenty-five years old when he was taken into exile. If it refers to the date he was called to be a prophet, then he would have been much older when taken to Babylon. He settled with the exiles at Telabib on the banks of the Chebar (3:15) where the Jews were allowed to continue their religious practices and where they lived under conditions favorable enough to allow some of them to develop commercial interests eventually. Although Daniel is mentioned twice in the book (Ezekiel 14:14 and 20), Jeremiah is not, but it seems likely that some communication occurred between the exiles and Jerusalem so that Ezekiel probably knew who Jeremiah was.

Ezekiel's prophecy is an example of apocalyptic literature. The word apocalypse is a combination of two Greek words: *apo* meaning "away from" and serving the function in this case of the English *un* and *kalyptein* meaning to "conceal" or "cover". Hence apocalypse means revelation, discovery, or disclosure. It uncovers the hidden truth about its subject.

Apocalyptic literature is characterized by strong dualism. It assumes the reality of two powerful spiritual forces in conflict, a conflict that directly impacts mundane affairs and whose progress can be traced in mundane developments. Natural catastrophes (a drought, for example) might suggest victories for evil spiritual forces while natural benefits (the end of the drought) might suggest victories for benevolent spiritual powers. Hence such literature "reveals" that the real forces controlling the world are spiritual forces, that developments in this world mirror developments in another world. Because it assumes there is little human beings can do to affect the outcome of the spiritual struggle except to pray, the apocalyptic world view is fatalistic. Also since apocalyptic visions tend to incorporate crises and catastrophes, apocalyptic literature tends to be pessimistic in the short term. But since apocalyptic literature envisions this struggle as continuing until good finally and conclusively triumphs, it is optimistic in the long term. Such literature then has a strong eschatological focus. Apocalyptic literature typically employs a wide variety of symbols: fantastic creatures, angels and demons, pseudo-geography, and the like. Events in the heavens are often described as being highly significant, and there is a marked reliance on the mystical significance of numbers. Other examples of apocalyptic literature in the Bible are Daniel, Zechariah, and John's Revelation which was itself greatly influenced by Ezekiel's vision.

As should be evident, the writer of an apocalypse, for all the mystery of the symbols he employs, presents a very clear theology, and Ezekiel is no exception. In Ezekiel's mind God is intimately involved with his people, yet at the same time majestic, alien, remote, an insight with profound trinitarian implications. God desires that we should have knowledge of him (Ezekiel uses the phrase "you shall know" more than sixty times). But knowledge of God comes with responsibilities of the most profound sort. For those who would be in relationship to him, God demands not just abstinence from vice but a life of active virtue. It is not enough to avoid sin, to please God one must pursue the good. This ethical dimension is strikingly clear in Ezekiel, but more striking is the prophet's emphasis on the sinner's individual responsibility, an emphasis that stands out starkly against the background of the corporate responsibility asserted by the other prophets.

The alien nature of the divine as well as divinity's involvement in human affairs is symbolized in Ezekiel's encounter with the multi-eyed cherubim who move over the earth but who elude his attempts to describe them. Those passages haunt the reader, they seem both detailed and incomprehensible. With so much information about them, we sense that we ought to be able to picture the creatures, yet we cannot.

Other famous accounts in Ezekiel include God's judgment on the king of Tyrus (chapter 28), Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones (chapter 37), the war between Israel and the army of Gog (chapters 38 and 39), Ezekiel's vision of the temple comprising chapters 40 - 46, and the vision of the holy river that flowed eastward from the threshold of the house of God (chapter 47). We will discuss none of these passages, nor will we discuss God's repeated references to Ezekiel as "son of man" (*ben-'adam*), an address that makes Ezekiel unique among the prophets. These passages are simply too long to deal with in a study of this sort and, in the case of the "son of man" nomenclature the issues are too complex to dissect here. (For example, how is the title related to a similar title in Daniel or I Enoch where it clearly has messianic overtones it seems to lack in Ezekiel? Should we interpret Ezekiel, as C. Hassell Bullock has suggested, as a messianic prototype and hence as a bridge between the Old and New Testaments?²) Instead we will be discussing seven fairly brief passages which will on the one hand serve to illumine the mind of Ezekiel and on the other avoid some of the more difficult issues his book raises.

² *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, March 1982, "Ezekiel, Bridge Between the Testaments" by C. Hassell Bullock, pp. 23 - 31

And he said unto me, Son of man, I send thee to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that hath rebelled against me: they and their fathers have transgressed against me, even unto this very day. For they are impudent children and stiffhearted. I do send thee unto them; and thou shalt say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God. And they, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear (for they are a rebellious house,) yet shall know that there hath been a prophet among them.

Ezekiel 2:3 - 5

Stressing the rebelliousness of his chosen people, God informs Ezekiel that he is sending the prophet to deliver his message ("thou shalt say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God") and that even if they fail to heed it, they will nevertheless know that he is a true prophet of God. Not only the prophet's words, his deeds, too, revealed him as a servant of God. Those deeds were often extreme as we have seen: Hosea married a prostitute and Isaiah walked naked for three years. But perhaps none behaved as strangely as did Ezekiel. So extravagantly did he behave that modern readers have suspected the prophet of periodic insanity, epilepsy, or drug use, especially when they have considered his behavior in tandem with the intensity of his extraordinary visions. Such speculation cannot be falsified or verified, nor is it particularly helpful in understanding the prophet's message, but it is worth pointing out that his contemporaries did not dismiss him as a drug-addled madman. Instead they paid attention when he laid siege to the tile or dug through the wall bearing the stuff of his captivity upon his shoulder. As God had promised, they knew a prophet had been among them. Our hearts are hard and our minds are not fixed on the things of God. Sometimes it takes extreme actions and radical words to convey to us the truth of our situation.

But thou, son of man, hear what I say unto thee: Be not thou rebellious like that rebellious house: open thy mouth, and eat what I give thee.

And when I looked, behold, an hand was sent unto me; and, lo, a roll of a book was therein; and he spread it before me; and it was written within and without; and there was written therein lamentations, and mourning, and woe. Moreover he said unto me, Son of man, eat that thou findest; eat this roll, and go speak unto the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and he caused me to eat that roll. And he said unto me, cause thy belly to eat, and fill thy bowels with that roll that I give thee. Then did I eat it; and it was in my mouth as honey for sweetness.

Ezekiel 2:8 - 3:3

The same symbol of a scroll or book containing God's judgments occurs in Revelation 5:1 and again in Revelation 10:8 - 11. As in Ezekiel's vision so in Revelation 5:1: the book sealed with seven seals like the scroll given to Ezekiel is "written within and on the backside", symbolizing the abundance of calamities God has purposed to visit upon his people (Ezekiel) and the world (Revelation). As in Ezekiel's vision so in Revelation 10:8 - 11, the scroll or book tastes as sweet as honey. The difference is that when John eats the book, it makes his belly bitter. There is no such description about Ezekiel's belly when he eats the book although we are told that he fills his bowels with it. It seems likely that the bitterness in John's belly was occasioned by his realization that the end of the age had come and that God's judgments entailed a finality they had lacked before. The judgments Ezekiel had to pronounce, harsh as they were, were sweet in his mouth because they were the word of God. They did not make his belly bitter because they were judgments intended to bring about repentance. The judgments pronounced by John were sweet in his mouth because they were the word of God, but they made his belly bitter because there was no more recourse from God's wrath. Those under the judgment were hearing of their doom.

Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die, and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life: the same

wicked man shall die in his iniquity: but his blood will I require at thine hand. Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul. Again, When a righteousness man doth turn from his righteousness, and commit iniquity, and I lay a stumblingblock before him, he shall die: because thou hast not given him warning, he shall die in his sin, and his righteousness which he hath done shall not be remembered; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Nevertheless if thou warn the righteous man, that the righteous sin not, and he doth not sin, he shall surely live, because he is warned; also thou hast delivered thy soul.

Ezekiel 3:17 - 21

(see Ezekiel 33:8 - 9)

Appointed as a watchman over the house of Israel, Ezekiel found that he was responsible for the behavior of those under his care. If he saw a person commit a sin and failed to warn that person, the person would be counted guilty but so would Ezekiel. In this way Ezekiel was forced to play the role of the conscientious shepherd. It is a role not unlike the role assumed today by those who exercise various ministries in the church. God intends that his shepherds watch over his sheep, feed those sheep with the word, care for them when they are in need, and admonish them when they sin. To fail in that service is a serious breach of trust. Here we discover how serious. A shepherd whether a minister, a teacher, a person exercising a prophetic office, or whatever, who does not admonish a Christian (the house of Israel universalized as the church) when that Christian sins, assumes some of the responsibility for that sin, a responsibility for which the minister will be required to give an account. Therefore James says:

My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.

James 3:1

The expression "stumblingblock" calls to mind the words of Jesus when he compares himself to the stone the builders rejected and then says:

...whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.

Matthew 21:43

To fall upon Christ and be broken suggests repentance. To be fallen upon and ground to powder suggests judgment of the kind described in Daniel 2:31 - 35 when the stone fell upon the image beginning at its feet, ground it to powder, and then filled the whole earth. The stumblingblock to which Ezekiel refers will cause the death of a sinner only if that sinner fails to heed the prophet's words or is not warned. Indeed, the prophet himself may be thought of in this case as a stumblingblock to the sinner. Such a stumblingblock is not meant to suggest that God causes a person to sin but is meant instead to assure the sinner that even temptations are under God's providential care, that nothing happens apart from God's will.

The prophet as stumblingblock should serve to remind us that being popular is not the first priority of a Christian minister. Indeed, properly speaking, it is not a priority at all. A minister should teach God's truth and seek God's will, realities which, outside the new creation, are seldom popular and win at best grudging respect. This is a principle which churches in religiously pluralistic environments where no financial support beyond the congregation itself is available and democratic institutions are the norm can easily overlook. In such an environment financial pressures constantly tempt ministers toward attracting larger crowds. Not only do such crowds bolster giving, they are also seen as authenticating the message of the minister. They are a badge of success. Nevertheless in the long run faithful ministers build stronger congregations than popular ministers because whereas popular ministers measure their efficacy by the size of their following, faithful ministers measure theirs by nurtured believers. As we read in Proverbs 9:8:

Reprove not a scorner, lest he hate thee: rebuke a wise man, and he will love thee.

Sadly, many in our churches today reveal themselves as scorners when they are reprovved. They cherish their religious opinions as somehow sacrosanct for no other reason than that those opinions are theirs. But no one has the right to be wrong. Error is not a virtue to be defended, it is a fault to be corrected. Flawed opinions corrupt the integrity of belief.

Finally, note that an unrepented sin will bring the earlier righteousness of the sinner to no account. One sin, as we have observed before, will undo a perfect life. As James put it:

For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.

James 2:10

The life we are living is not evaluated based on some final tabulation of pluses and minuses. God is not as it were keeping score. What counts is not the “feathers in our cap” or the “black marks against us”. What counts is our status in Christ, our response to the stumblingblock and whether we fall upon it and are broken or whether it falls upon us and grinds us to powder.

And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh: that they may walk in my statutes, and keep mine ordinances, and do them: and they shall be my people, and I shall be their God.

Ezekiel 11:19 - 20

Here God speaks through his prophet of the new creation. He will make a new people by giving them a new heart (that is, as we saw when discussing Jeremiah 17:9, those feelings, that will, and intellect so central to what we are) and a new spirit, that is a new motivation. This passage points to our inability as we are to walk in God's statutes and truly be his people. We need not only to be called and redeemed, we need to be recreated. God who has the power to create can do that for us. We begin to realize that this has happened when we begin to gauge things in this world differently. Activities that once appealed to us no longer do. Ideas which once seemed credible now seem absurd. Our way of evaluating and understanding the world shifts. Conversion really does become a Rubicon across which the new man invades to overthrow the old, a Jordan which, opening before us, escorts us into a promised land.

Our relationship to sin is one of the immediate ways we can experience this transformation. Often at conversion believers are freed from the power of besetting sins, but sometimes those old temptations remain in weakened form and we may succumb to them. When we do, we gain not the relief and pleasure we expected, but shame, grief, and spiritual pain. What we once interpreted as habit we now recognize as failure. Worse, we understand it as failure over which we have little control. In our disgust with our own sin, we know something of God's righteousness. This is the struggle Paul describes in Romans 7, the struggle in which we discover that sin lives within us as an unwelcomed entity warring against us and bringing us into captivity. Our minds have been renewed for the service of life but our bodies remain bodies of death. In this struggle between new life and old death the believer finds victory, first by praying in faith to Jesus with prayers for deliverance, and second in the knowledge that the very struggle itself witnesses to the gracious state in which the believer now lives. We may stumble but we are no longer among the condemned. As Paul describes it:

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

II Corinthians 5:17

In each believer the eschaton, the “last thing”, is being born. The redeemed individually and in community are the harbingers of an age which God in his own time will call forth. He has selected us as his witnesses for that coming miracle, the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem, and the restoration of the world.

The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him. But if the wicked will turn from all his sin that he hath committed, and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die. All his transgressions that he hath committed, they shall not be mentioned unto him: in his righteousness that he hath done he shall live. Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord God: and not that he should return from his ways and live?

But when the righteous turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, and doeth according all the abominations that the wicked man doeth, shall he live? All his righteousness that he hath done shall not be mentioned: in his trespass that he hath trespassed, and in his sin that he hath sinned, in them shall he die.

Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, saith the Lord God. Repent, and turn yourselves for all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin.

Ezekiel 18:20 - 24 and 30

...I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live....

Ezekiel 33:11

Ezekiel in this passage stresses the individual nature of sin. The people of Judah believed they were suffering for the sins of their ancestors. They had a proverb, “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” (Ezekiel 18:3) By this proverb the Jews sought to excuse their own sins by pretending that they were suffering though innocent of wrongdoing. Not so, Ezekiel told them. While the iniquity of the fathers is visited upon their children (Exodus 20:5), its effects are such that the children themselves participate in the sins of the fathers by practicing them. The pernicious influence of sin draws everyone into its spreading orbit. No deed exists as a discrete unit complete unto itself, instead its influence extends through the life of the one who commits the deed and from him into society.

One of the great errors involved in the concept of karma is the idea that karma is generated only by the individual and must be worked off only by the individual. In other words, what happens to one happens because of what one has done oneself. In a universe dominated by karma it is not possible to genuinely harm or benefit another. Deeds done to another whether good or ill happen to that other only because of what he or she has done either in this life or in some life before. All one can do when one acts is affect oneself. One either creates or works out one’s own karma.

The Christian belief in redemption assumes something radically different. Christians believe that the deeds one does actually do affect the spiritual life of another, that it is possible to benefit someone spiritually by doing good for them or to injure someone spiritually by doing harm to them. Hence, prayer can benefit the one prayed for. Christ’s death can redeem us. Deeds of love can be used to inspire repentance and cover a multitude of sins (James 5:20). By the same token sinful deeds can corrupt others by turning them away from God or inspiring sin in them. In this way the sins of the fathers are visited upon their children. The fathers mislead their children, corrupt them, inspire them to sin, a reality the “sour grapes” proverb pointedly ignored. Because of original sin,

we are born with a predisposition to do wrong, but it is a predisposition that can be mitigated by outside influences. We do participate in the moral reality created by our society. We may be born into sin, but each one of us commits more than enough of his or her own. As we turn toward sin, our righteousness is forgotten.

The good news, the gospel, is that if we turn from those sins, as God tells us through Ezekiel, he will graciously forget them and remember our righteous deeds. This God does not because he is in any way required to but simply because in acting so he expresses his character. Because he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, he pleases himself when he redeems us. The repentance of the wicked gives God pleasure. How different we are! Too often like Jonah we desire to see the wicked punished and take pleasure in the spectacle their punishment affords. We who are guilty delight in the death of the wicked but fear death (which after all is the punishment for sin) when it falls on us. God who is good desires that none should die. In this way the fierce joy we take in the punishment of others betrays our own iniquity. This is not to say that punishment, even severest punishment, is unjustified. The divine law insists that sin must be punished and provides for the death penalty for numerous offenses. Indeed, the social dimensions of sin would by themselves justify a society's use of the death penalty. It is rather to say that exercising the death penalty is not an occasion for joy or even satisfaction. It is a melancholy duty and should inspire sorrow and fear. What is an occasion for joy is when the guilty one turns from sin to God.

And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land that I should not destroy it: but I found none. Therefore have I poured out mine indignation upon them; I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath: their own way I have recompensed upon their heads, saith the Lord God.

Ezekiel 22:30 - 31

Because he does not delight in the death of the wicked, God sought for a man who could stand in the gap and intercede between God and his people. The idea of standing in the gap, a gap created by sin, and pleading with God for mercy is one that occurs early in the Old Testament. In the eighteenth chapter of Genesis we read how Abraham stood in the gap and pleaded for mercy for two cities. God honored his plea and for the sake of fifty, forty, thirty, twenty, and finally ten righteous men, agreed to spare Sodom and Gomorrah. Moses, too, stood in the gap and pleaded for his people when God would have destroyed them (Exodus 32:9 - 14). In both cases Abraham and Moses, because they had been chosen to have a special relationship with God, were able to offer intercessory prayer. Such intercessory prayer is an example of the power to benefit others that people enjoying a spiritual relationship with God can exercise. Because each believer in Christ can petition the Lord directly, it is a relationship all of us now enjoy. These are not wrestling prayers. Neither Abraham or Moses wrestled with God. They were not trying to force God to do something he was unwilling to do, as is evidenced by this passage in Ezekiel where God reveals that he seeks such people to petition him.

If God is so willing to refrain his wrath, why does he need to be petitioned? The petitioning is revelatory. Intercessory prayer reveals several things about God. First, it reveals his love for us. God seeks people to petition him because he loves us. His love for us lies at the very heart of his plan of redemption. Jesus did not rush to the world to defuse the wrath of the angry Father. Instead, we read in John 3:16 that God's love for the world was his reason for sending his Son. Second, intercessory prayer reveals the role that Jesus will play. Jesus, the perfect sacrifice, the high priest, the king, the friend, and the loving husband is now the one who stands in the gap for us and secures our pardon and deliverance from God's wrath. Third, intercessory prayer reveals God's willingness to be in partnership with us. He does not choose to make us "helpless pieces of a game he plays". He chooses us instead to be members of his bride. To ask why God chooses to reveal himself in this way is a different form of the question: why do things happen as they do? And that question is a disguised form of a question that is ultimately unanswerable: why does anything happen? We live in a world that is as it is. The Bible helps us to understand that world and our place in it but does not reveal the innermost workings of God's mind. God is not some cosmic Teddy Bear that we can

cuddle. God is majestic, alien, and remote, but he is also a being who desires to be intimate with us and who has provided in Jesus a way for that intimacy to be secured. The prophets, God's voices to us, proclaimed that reality, perhaps none more clearly than Ezekiel.

And I will make them and the places round about my hill a blessing; and I will cause the shower to come down in his season; there shall be showers of blessing.

Ezekiel 34:26

Having reproved the shepherds of Israel (34:1 - 10), God through Ezekiel promises that he himself will seek out and save the sheep (34:11 - 22) and put a single shepherd over them (34:23). There will be a covenant of peace between him and his flock (34:25) and round about his hill showers of blessing shall fall. This chapter lies behind Christ's parable of the shepherd seeking his lost sheep (Matthew 18:12 - 13) and of his description of himself as the true shepherd (John 10:1 - 16). Of course Ezekiel's immediate hearers would not have known it (prophecy, as we have seen, needs the illumination of the Spirit in his own time), but the hill referred to is Golgotha, the new Zion, around which showers of blessing, released by Christ's sacrifice, will fall.



Chapter Eight: Prophets of the Exile: Obadiah and Joel

Jerusalem had fallen before. Shishak of Egypt pillaged the city while Solomon's son Rehoboam sat on the throne (I King 14:25 - 28). During the reign of Jehoram the Philistines in league with the Arabians broke into the city "and carried away all the substance that was found in the king's house, and his sons and his wives" (II Chronicles 21:16 - 17). And Israel led by king Jehoash also looted the holy city (II Kings 14:13 - 14). The temple had been defiled and stripped of its precious metals on at least two of those occasions, but the temple had never before been destroyed nor had so many among the Jewish leaders been brought into bondage. When in 722/21 BC a similar catastrophe befell Israel, and Samaria after a three year siege was captured (II Kings 17:5), the ten tribes dwelling in the Northern Kingdom never recovered. Indeed, those remaining in the land lost their identity as Israelites and were called Samaritans (II Kings 17:29). Therefore it should come as no surprise that the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and their exile in Babylon left the Jews disorganized and fragmented. What is surprising is that they were not destroyed by the experience. Instead, as we noted earlier, they were transformed. They showed that they could maintain their identity as a people apart from the land, and could retain their religious identity without the temple or the tabernacle, both of which had loomed large in their theological universe. During the years of exile, the first rabbis and synagogues began to appear; prayer, pious works, and study of the sacred texts became practical substitutes for the sacrificial cultus; circumcision and the Sabbath assumed an importance they had not had before; and the Jews, reflecting upon their history in the light of the vindication of the harsh sounding prophets, wrote the books of Samuel and the Kings. Even the Hebrew script in which they were written was transformed. The flowing strokes of Old Hebrew were replaced by the block letters in which Hebrew is still written today.¹

One might have expected such a fertile period of religious ferment to have inspired intense prophetic activity, but that does not seem to have been the case. Instead we know of only two prophets dating from this time: Obadiah whose prophecy is directed not against Babylon but against Edom, and Joel whose prophecy is occasioned by a plague of grasshoppers. While the book of Daniel, a combination of history, biography, and apocalyptic visions which the Jews themselves included among the Kethuvim or Writings rather than among the prophets, also relates to the captivity, we shall not be considering it here. Its form places it somewhat outside the purview of the prophesies we are considering in this study.

The Babylonian exile, or the Babylonian captivity as it is often called, is dated between 586 BC when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and 516 BC when it was rebuilt, thus lasting the seventy years Jeremiah had prophesied.

And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

Jeremiah 25:11 (see, too, Daniel 9:2 and Zechariah 7:5)

Nebuchadnezzar II died in 562 BC. Under him Babylon had become a great power, but with his death, the glory that was Babylon began to fade. Awel-Marduk, also known as Evil-Merodach, Nebuchadnezzar's successor, ruled from 562 until 560 when he was murdered by Neriglissar, probably the same man referred to in Jeremiah 39:3 and 39:13 as Nergal-sharezer, the "Rab-mag" (KJV, ASV), "Rabmag" (RSV), or "a high official" (NIV) who released Jeremiah after the fall of Jerusalem. Rab-mag is an interesting word appearing only in those two passages of Scripture. It is

¹ *Biblical Archaeology Review*, March/April 1997, "Defusing Pseudo-Scholarship: the Siloam Inscriptions Ain't Hasmonian", see especially Jo Ann Hackett's article "Spelling Differences and Letter Shapes Are Telltale Signs", pp. 42 - 44

probably coined by combining *magi*, a Persian loan word describing a class of Zoroastrian priests, and *rab* a Hebrew word indicating abundant rank. It is possible that Neriglissar murdered Awel-Marduk as part of a revolution that had the support of both the priests and the army and then assumed the throne as the husband of Nebuchadnezzar's daughter.

In 557 BC Neriglissar decisively repelled an invasion by the forces of king Appuasus of Cilicia (what is now southern Turkey), a nation that had won its independence from Assyria after the death of Ashurbanipal, and then conquered the island of Pitusu. Having demonstrated his military skill on both land and sea, Neriglissar returned home triumphantly in February - March 556 and died the same year.

His young son Labashi-Marduk ruled for a few months before he was murdered by Nabonidus, one of his courtiers, who then seized the throne. Nabonidus ruled until 539. He was the last king of Babylon.

Nabonidus was a very religious man. While Marduk was the god of Babylon and the head of the pantheon during the period of the Babylonian empire, Nabonidus was devoted to Sin, the moon-god worshipped by his parents at Haran. The temple of Sin at Haran had been destroyed in 610 BC by the Medes and not restored, so when Cyprus rebelled against the Medes, Nabonidus made a treaty with Cyprus and was able to reinstate the cult of Sin. So absorbed did he become in promoting the cult of Sin that he neglected the city of Babylon which was of course associated with Marduk. However, he continued to oversee his empire and in 554 and 553 conducted successful military campaigns against Syria and Edom. Finally, in 548 he moved to the city of Tema in Arabia and between 549 and 545 turned governing authority in Babylon over to Belshazzar.

Meanwhile a new power was making itself felt in the region. Cyrus the Great of Persia came to the throne in 559 as a vassal of Media. Taking advantage of the weak rule of Astyages, the ruler of Media since 585, Cyrus made an alliance with Babylon, then moved against Astyages. Faced with the Persian threat Astyages' own army rebelled against him and turned him over to Cyrus in 550. Deeply concerned, Nabonidus, Croesus of Lydia (a kingdom in what is now northwestern Turkey), and Amasis of Egypt who was nominally under Nabonidus' control, concluded an alliance, but when Cyrus attacked Croesus at Cappadocia in 547, neither Nabonidus or Amasis moved to help him. The battle was indecisive, giving Croesus room to withdraw to Sardis where he hoped to winter, rebuild his army, and, with the help of his allies, repel Cyrus the following spring. But Cyrus in a surprise campaign struck at Sardis and, using camels to panic the horses in the superior cavalry of Croesus, captured both Sardis and Miletus. This checked the Greeks in the west and left Cyrus free to campaign in the east.

Interpreting these events as a sign of divine dissatisfaction with his effort to reinstate the cult of Sin, Nabonidus, in an attempt to restore the worship of Marduk, Nebo, and other neglected gods, left Tema and return to Babylon. But his reception by the priests was unenthusiastic and the general population was dissatisfied with the belated reforms. Therefore when Cyrus invaded the Babylonian empire in 539 he was hailed as a liberator. Ur, Larsa, Erech, Kish, and finally Sippar surrendered with token resistance or none at all. Then on October 13, 539 BC, Gobryas of Susa in Elam east of the Tigris, one of Cyrus' commanders, captured Babylon itself. Belshazzar was killed but Nabonidus escaped, was captured, and treated favorably after his release.

So it was that the Jews then lived under Babylonian rule for 47 of the 70 years that elapsed between the destruction of Solomon's temple and the construction of the second temple, and under Persian rule until 332 BC when Alexander the Great moved against Darius III and Palestine was occupied by Alexander's armies. Although Persian rule does not seem to have been particularly harsh, the Jews apparently celebrated Alexander as a liberator, for according to legend the High Priest of Jerusalem at the head of a formal procession welcomed him to the city.

Section A: Obadiah

Though some commentators suggest that Obadiah prophesied early and is the first of the writing prophets, it is more probable that he prophesied shortly after the fall of Jerusalem. Obadiah (his name means "servant of the Lord") is a common Old Testament name. Nothing is known of his life and his book is the shortest of the prophetic books. Indeed, it is one of the shortest in the Bible, only Jude, two of John's letters, and Philemon are shorter.

Obadiah's vision begins with an indictment of the Edomites. Edom (the name means red) was a mountainous region adjacent to and southeast of Judah and south of Moab. Approximately 100 miles long and twenty miles wide, it boasted two port cities: Elath and Ezion-geber on the eastern arm of the Red Sea, what we know today as the Gulf of Aqabah or the Gulf of Eilat. Its capital was Bozrah but its most famous fortress was Sela or Rock, also called Teman (v. 9), a city we remember as Petra, although Petra itself may have been carved later, around 200 BC, by a tribe of desert Arabs known as Nabataeans.² According to Genesis 36, Esau, the elder twin brother of Jacob, dwelt in the hill country of Seir and is the father of the Edomites. Genesis 36:7 tells us that the two brothers agreed to dwell separately because the land of Canaan was unable to support the large number of cattle both brothers possessed, a reason reminiscent of the one given for the separation of Abraham and Lot in Genesis 13:1 - 13. The Edomites replaced the Horites who lived in Seir and who seem to have been cave dwellers as the name Hori suggests the hole of a serpent or a cave. Apparently many of the Edomites adopted Horite shelters as their own. The Edomites probably reached the height of their cultural development in the seventh and early sixth centuries BC.

There was occasional friction between Edom and Judah in the days of Saul, David, and later Jehoshaphat, so much so that Isaiah had earlier condemned Edom (Isaiah 34:5 - 17; 63:1 - 4). Inscriptions describing Assyrian and Babylonian military campaigns make it clear that Edom was an important political power in the eastern Mediterranean world. In fact, the presence of Edomite shrines in the Negev in Judah indicate that this part of Judah was at times occupied by the Edomites, though it is not clear whether their presence indicates military or economic activity. Certainly by the late seventh and early sixth centuries they were an established presence southeastern Judah.³ So when Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem, Edom participated with him (verses 11 - 14). For their actions Obadiah promises that they will be punished (see, too, Jeremiah 49:17). And in the days of the Maccabees that punishment was exacted. The Edomites who had moved even deeper into Judea and became known as Idumeans (a Greek form of Edomites) were completely subdued by the Maccabees and even forcibly circumcised. But their subjugation set the stage for one of those ironies that haunt history. Herod the Great, appointed to rule by the Romans, was an Idumean.

It happened this way. When Alexander Jannaeus, the Hasmonean ruler who introduced crucifixion into Palestine, died in 76 BC, he was succeeded by his wife Salome Alexander who ruled for ten more years. When she died in 67 BC, her two sons Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II vied with one another for power, eventually dividing rule between themselves. Hyrcanus II became the high priest and Aristobulus II the political leader. Antipater, the governor of Idumaea, had begun to involve himself more deeply in Hasmonean affairs, an involvement encouraged by his subject status, and he exercised considerable influence over both Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II.

In 63 BC Pompey made Syria a Roman province and subjugated Palestine in part with the approval and cooperation of the Pharisees and other religious Jews who had grown increasingly

² Magnusson, Magnus, *BC: The Archaeology of the Bible Lands* (London, The Book Club Associates, 1977), Chapter 12 "The End of the Old", pp. 215 - 217

³ *Biblical Archaeology Review*, July/August 1996, "Smashing the Idols: Piecing Together an Edomite Shrine in Judah" by Rudolf Cohen and Yigal Yisrael, pp.40 - 51; November/December 1996, "Edomites Advance into Judah - Israelite Defensive Fortresses Inadequate" by Itzhaq Beit-Arieh, pp. 28 - 36; March/April 1997, "Underground Metropolis - the Subterranean World of Maresha" by Amos Kloner, p. 30.

disgusted with Hasmonean rule. Aristobulus II lost his authority at this time but lived until 49 BC. Hyrcanus II remained high priest. From 63 BC on the Romans administered Palestine.

Antipater in 47 BC was appointed procurator of Judea by Julius Caesar. Because of Antipater's appointment, Herod, his second son, was at the age of fifteen named governor of Galilee, then in 41 BC was made tetrarch of Judea by Anthony. Forced to flee the following year, he went to Rome where he was appointed king of Judea. Assured of Roman backing, he returned to Judea and by 37 BC had taken Jerusalem.

A cruel and treacherous ruler, Herod was also an able administrator and a great builder. He constructed fortresses like Masada and Herodium, rebuilt Samaria which he renamed Sebaste, built the port city of Caesarea, and did much to refurbish other cities under his authority. Though he did not share their faith (he built other temples to other gods and was fully pagan), Herod did wish to conciliate his Jewish subjects so in 20 BC he began to restore Yahweh's temple in Jerusalem. The task took a year-and-a-half and, with the completion of its massive platform, transformed the building into the largest structure in antiquity. However, modifications and additions continued until long after Herod's death at Jericho in April of 4 BC so that the Jews could claim with ample justification that the temple had taken forty-six years to build (John 2:20).

Obadiah details none of this. He simply in twenty-one verses pronounces God's judgment upon Edom as a reward for Edom's treachery, and in so doing he foretells the ultimate triumph of his own people. Obadiah is not often quoted but one particular passage stands out:

The pride of thine heart hath deceived thee...

Obadiah, verse 3a

This statement summarizes the human problem. The Hebrew word translated here as pride is *zadown* suggesting presumptuousness and comes from *zawd* meaning insolence. Hence pride in this sense is not to be taken as healthy self-respect but as arrogance born of an exaggerated opinion of one's own accomplishments or importance. The Greek concept of hubris which lay behind so much Greek tragedy captures Obadiah's meaning exactly. Edom, believing himself impregnable among his mountains (v. 3), not only ignored the plight of his brother Judah but rejoiced over his destruction, seeing in it an opportunity for his own advancement (v. 12). Worse, the Edomites helped strip Jerusalem of its treasures (v. 13), caught Jews who fled, and turned them over to the Babylonians (v. 14). The suggestion here is not that Edom was righting some ancient wrong and seeking revenge for Jacob's deception of Esau, that Edom's actions could be interpreted as a just recompense in the course of history, or that Edom itself is being coerced by Babylon. Rather the suggestion is that the same carelessness Esau had shown toward his birthright has been magnified in his offspring who show that they scorn the descendants of the one who acquired the birthright. Edom still does not understand the privileges associated with the birthright and considers it of no account. Even as Esau traded his birthright for a bowl of lentils, so Edom will betray God's chosen and for the sake of momentary gain will cooperate with those who despoil Judah. Like Esau, Edom continued to be insolent.

The fifth commandment adjures obedience to one's parents. Human insolence and its contribution to sin is the reality illuminated by the commandment. God has given parents authority over their children. To disregard that authority is to disregard the order imposed by God. Yet in the West today we associate maturity with independence. One is an adult when one can accept responsibility for one's own actions and care for oneself. As adulthood is what children naturally strive for, so independence in our cultural context is what they seek and are encouraged to seek. Not surprisingly, making judgments about when to obey and when to disobey their parents is one of the primary ways children assert their independence. Fed by such cultural assumptions, assumptions shared by their parents, children are expected to become insolent, rebellious, and arrogant, and they seldom disappoint us. Violation of the fifth commandment is part of the rite of passage in our culture. Here

we all participate individually and socially in the commission of a sin which is punishable by death. Culturally we are the heirs of Esau and the pride of our hearts has deceived us.

Section B: Joel

Like Obadiah, Joel shares his name with many other Old Testament figures. Joel (the name means "the Lord is God" or "Yahweh [is his] God") was the son of Pethuel (Joel 1:1). Beyond that, nothing is known of him. Even dating the book is problematic. Many scholars believe all apocalyptic literature must be dated during or after the exile, one of their justifications for dating parts of Isaiah late. It is not surprising then that such scholars, basing their judgment on Joel's apocalyptic quality, date it late as well. Others argue that since Judah's enemies are not specifically identified (something that would probably have been done were the book late), it must have been written earlier. Hence Joel has been placed from the reign of king Joash (835 - 796 BC) into the Persian period. Joel is prophesying in the midst of a natural disaster (a plague of grasshoppers) that could have come at any time may well explain why no other enemies are named. This means that establishing a firm date for the book has no bearing on its message. However, Joel 3:1 argues for a later date as does the mention of "the Grecians" in Joel 3:6. Therefore, we are dating Joel late.

Four well known passages are found in Joel.

Be glad then, ye children of Zion, and rejoice in the Lord your God: for he hath given you the former rain moderately, and he will cause to come down for you the rain, the former rain, and the latter rain in the first month.

Joel 2:23

Joel in his prophecy describes how the plague of locusts leaves the land desolate (2:3), how the people of Zion are assembled to be sanctified (2:15 - 16), how the priests intercede for the people (2:17), and how the Lord then takes pity on his people (2:18), drives the grasshoppers away (2:20), and sends restoring rain (2:23). The agricultural focus of the prophecy seems clear enough, but with the beginning of the Pentecostal Movement in the early twentieth century, Joel 2:23 took on a new meaning.

Pentecostalism is rooted in revival, specifically the Topeka, Kansas, revival in 1901 which by October of 1903 had spread to Galena, Kansas, and by 1905 had reached Columbus, Melrose, and Baxter Springs, Kansas, as well as Joplin, Missouri; the Welsh revival in 1904 which through the agency of the British empire was able to spread to churches in Africa and India; and the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles, California, that lasted from 1906 to 1909. These revivals generated a great deal of excitement among certain elements of the Protestant church as people who experienced glossolalia began to search the Scriptures for guidance in understanding the gift.

In 1910 David Wesley Myland published a defense of the phenomenon entitled *The Latter Rain Covenant and Pentecostal Power* in which he argued that while Joel (which he dated very early) had been describing a natural cycle of rain, the former rain which came just after planting and the later rain which fell at the end of the growing season, the image had a spiritual application that could be found in other prophets as well as in the New Testament. Myland then argued that the image could also be applied to history subsequent to the New Testament and claimed that Joel's former rain was the gift of tongues at Pentecost as described in the second chapter of Acts while his later rain was the current Pentecostal Revival. Myland interpreted the twentieth century Pentecostal revival as the herald of a great evangelistic crusade which, in a recapitulation of events in the first century, would sweep many new believers into the church before the second coming of Christ. Ironically a revival within Pentecostalism itself beginning in 1948 at Sharon Bible College in North Battleford, Saskatchewan, claimed that it was the true latter rain and named itself the Latter-Rain Movement. This movement gave rise to the Independent Churches of the Latter-Rain Revival.

Here is a dilemma which illustrates the problem of applying prophecies to current events. Was Joel really talking about the Pentecostal revival? And if he was, which of the revivals did he have in mind, the one at the beginning of the twentieth century or the one that began in 1948? How can we tell except by divine illumination? The prophecy of Joel does seem to have a sequence. The rains fall, the years the locusts have eaten are restored, and then events come to pass to which Peter refers. Let us consider that sequence.

And I will restore to you the years that the locusts have eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar, and the palmerworm, my great army which I sent among you.

Joel 2:25

This passage is often quoted by people who have wasted part of their lives but believe that God will restore those lost years by making the ones that follow especially meaningful and productive. Certainly God can do that and just as certainly the passage, by contrasting bumper harvests to come with the locust-ravaged desolation of the past, teaches such a principle. The passage also reminds us that the Lord of Sabaoth or armies has more than human armies at his command.

And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: and upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit. And I will shew wonders in the heavens and the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and the terrible day of the Lord come. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered: for in mount Zion and in Jerusalem shall be deliverance, as the Lord hath said, and in the remnant whom the Lord shall call.

Joel 2:28 - 32

Each year the Jews celebrated three great feasts: the feast of Passover, the feast of Pentecost, and the feast of Tabernacles. The feast of Passover commemorated the delivery of the Jews from bondage in Egypt. The feast of Tabernacles commemorated the time they dwelt in tents. The name Pentecost is a Latinization the Greek word *pentekoste* for fifty and refers to the fifty day interval between Pentecost and the Passover (see Leviticus 23:15 - 2). Because on each of these feasts Jewish men were required to present themselves before the Lord, and because the temple was the traditional place to do this, it is assumed that when the disciples gathered together in one place on the Pentecost after the crucifixion of Christ (Acts 2:1), that place was the temple. While they were there, the sound of a great wind was heard, tongues of fire appeared over the heads of the disciples, and they began to speak in other tongues. To explain what was happening, Peter referred to Joel 2:28 - 32:

But this is that [note the use of peshar] which was spoken by the prophet Joel: And it shall come to pass in the last days [note that these are the last days], saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; and on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit: and they shall prophesy: and I will shew wonders in heaven above, and signs in earth beneath; blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke: the sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and notable day of the Lord come: and it shall come to pass that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Acts 2:16 - 21

There are several things to notice here. First, Peter does not quote the exact version as we have it in the Old Testament. Instead his version is derived from the Septuagint. We can assume then that

exact wording is not important in this particular case. Second, we should also note that other remarkable phenomena (the darkening of the sun, the moon turning to blood, and so forth) did not occur, yet this does not stop Peter from proclaiming that the event foretold by Joel has been fulfilled. Third, the gift of languages evidenced by the disciples may be understood as representing the reversal of the confusion of languages at the tower of Babel as related in Genesis 11:1- 9, since at Pentecost speaker and listener could communicate easily through the agency of the Holy Spirit although they spoke different tongues. It is worth pointing out in this regard that traditionally this event at Pentecost has been understood as justifying the translation of the Scriptures so that the deeds of God can be proclaimed in all languages. It has not until this century been understood as the origin of prayers in the Spirit. While the Acts passage does not say the disciples spoke in specific languages (we are only told they spoke in other tongues [2:4]) but only says their hearers heard them in their own languages (2:6), and while Pentecostals frequently stress that point in an effort to identify Pentecost with glossolalia, it nevertheless seems reasonable to suggest that what occurred at Pentecost and what was occurring at Corinth were probably not directly related. Glossolalia has nothing to do with translation of the Scriptures. It is instead a private language of prayer or praise intelligible only to God or to others via an inspired interpreter. Indeed, when writing to the church at Corinth, Paul cautions against using "other tongues" in the presence of unbelievers (I Corinthians 14:23). Fourth, Peter seems to see the passage in Joel as fulfilled in his own day. Save for the possible exception of the heavenly portents, he does not indicate that there is a further fulfillment in the indefinite future, a latter rain. A reversal of God's judgment need occur only once.

What can we conclude from these observations? One of the most obvious points is that exact wording and exact fulfillment does not seem paramount in apocalyptic prophesy. Joel spoke of prophesy, visions, dreams, and heavenly wonders, but a rushing wind, tongues of fire, and miraculous communication were the events that actually fulfilled Joel's prediction. This makes the identification of fulfilled apocalyptic prophesy - its "this is that" aspect - very problematic. On the one hand, the non-literal nature of the symbols opens the door for the most imaginative sorts of interpretations, as though one were trying to decipher a cryptic saying by Nostradamus. On the other hand, it means that only the Spirit of God can give a certain interpretation since the particulars of the prophesy are so open-ended.

It would also seem fair to say that the events at Pentecost are sufficient to fulfill Joel's prophecy. We are given no reason to expect anything more. It is not enough for enthusiastic exegetes to construct imaginative scenarios from selected passages and then argue for their interpretation's plausibility. Plausibility (often existing only in the mind of the persuaded) is not the point. The point is truth. While there is no good reason to deny the validity of glossolalia as a form of prayer and worship, there are some excellent reasons for doubting that the twentieth century revival represents any "latter rain". Indeed, such phenomena have appeared sporadically throughout church history, a point Pentecostals seem eager to make. We have been enjoying showers right through the centuries.

**Proclaim ye this among the Gentiles; Prepare war, wake up the mighty men,
all men of war draw near; let them come up: beat your plowshares into
swords, and your pruninghooks into spears: let the weak say, I am strong....
Put ye in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe: come, get you down: for the press
is full, the fats overflow; for their wickedness is great. Multitudes, multitudes
in the valley of decision: for the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision.**

Joel 3:9 - 10, 13 - 14

Here is a reversal of the "beat your swords into plowshares" motif we looked at earlier. While Isaiah and Micah told us to beat our swords into plowshares, Joel tells us to prepare weapons of war. One is reminded of Christ shortly before he was to be crucified telling his disciples that those who had no swords should sell their mantles and buy them (Luke 22:36) and of Jesus' remark after he had talked

to the Samaritan woman that the apostles should lift up their eyes for the fields “are white already to harvest” (John 4:35). One is also reminded of the passage in Ecclesiastes:

To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven: ...
A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 and 8

Though Isaiah and Micah prophesied before Joel, the period they foresaw was later in history than the period Joel foresaw. Before there can be peace, there must be judgment, and that day of judgment, that “terrible day of the Lord”, is what has attracted Joel’s attention. John saw it too and described it in Revelation 14:14 - 20. Both men tell us that, as is so often the case, the reaping, the day of judgment, will involve war, in this case war between the believers and the unbelievers. But we also realize that this war began at Pentecost for that is the time of inspiration preceding the call to arms.

We are children of the eschaton, that is “the last thing”, or of the eschatos, “the last one”: Christ. Jesus is the culmination of this age (I Corinthians 15:20 - 28), the new or last or second Adam (I Corinthians 15:45 - 49). Adopted by him, we are called from this cursed world to be heralds of a new creation. As such we are to be teachers (Matthew 28:18 - 20); proclaimers of the gospel (Mark 16:15), witnesses (Luke 24:46; Acts 1:18;), reconcilers (II Corinthians 5:17 - 20). Hence the weapons of our warfare are the weapons of our inspiration: words of truth. As Paul tells us:

Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.

Colossians 4:6

The words we speak when they are spoken in accordance with the purposes of God are powerful and accomplish God’s ends (Hebrews 4:12).

We are soldiers, but soldiers who serve by telling the truth in meekness before God. Our very lives are testimonies whether we know it or not. Speaking on November 19, 1993, at the forty-fifth annual convention of the Evangelical Theological Society held in Washington, DC, Richard Halverson, Chaplain of the United States Senate, pointed out that like salt which does its work when it is invisible, we, too, work in secret. We do not chose to become Christ’s witnesses. We are his witnesses because he has chosen us. The witness is not what we do for God, it is what God is doing through us, and the full results of that will not be known until the end of time.⁴ The beast in league with the kings of the earth gather their armies to make war on Christ but he is the one who destroys them (Revelation 19:19 - 21).

The beginnings of the final struggle between the forces of light and truth and the forces of darkness and lies is what Joel foresees and what the Spirit reveals through Peter at Pentecost. Joel’s latter rain is not glossolalia but the proclamation of the deeds of God accomplishing God’s purposes as God works through us.

⁴ *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, March 1994, “God and Caesar” by Richard C. Halverson, pp. 125 - 129



Chapter Nine: Return and Rebuilding: Zechariah, Haggai, and Malachi

While empires like Assyria and Babylon had relocated their subject peoples in an effort to undermine and discourage revolt, Persia allowed those dispersed populations to return to their native lands. Reestablishing defeated nations in their homelands and allowing them to worship their own deities in their own temples there may have been an effort on the part of Cyrus to restore order to a cosmos badly disrupted by the Assyrians and Babylonians. Certainly, as we saw, Nabonidus by the end of his reign had come to believe that his problems were the result of his neglect of the gods and that some form of earlier worship needed to be restored, and just as certainly Cyrus claimed to be an agent of the gods, although this was a common claim at the time, rather like people today who believe themselves to be agents of history. Whatever their rationale for it, both Cyrus and Darius I were very serious about the policy. Darius pursued it even though the early part of his reign was disrupted by widespread rebellions, and Cyrus began his reign by initiating the new program. In his first year in what would have been in 538 BC, Cyrus issued a proclamation allowing the Jews to return to Israel (Ezra 1:1).

The return of the Jews took place in three or four waves: the first immediately following Cyrus' decree was led by Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah (Ezra 1:8, 11). His was a Babylonian name. During the exile it was common for Jews to take or be given Babylonian names. See Daniel 1:7. Zerubbabel, one of these returning Jews, was named governor of Judah (Haggai 2:21). Jeshua or Joshua, the high priest, also accompanied these returnees. The first wave began to rebuild the temple, but, encountering local opposition, abandoned the project for fifteen to eighteen years before being spurred by Zechariah and Haggai to finish it during the reign of Darius I (521 - 485). Some scholars suggest that Zerubbabel and Jeshua may have been part of a migration of Jews who resettled in Palestine during the early years of Darius I and that Zechariah and Haggai also arrived with this wave. If that were the case, there would have been four waves of immigrants instead of three.

The second wave (or the third) was led by Nehemiah who under Artaxerxes I (464 - 423) built the walls of Jerusalem. During the building of the wall the Samaritans led by Sanballat (Nehemiah, chapter 4) created a great deal of trouble for the returning Jews. Nehemiah through the course of these years made two trips to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:11 and 13:6 - 7), finishing the wall on his first visit and cleansing the temple during his second.

The third wave (or the fourth) was led by Ezra himself under the reign of Artaxerxes II (404 - 358). Ezra renewed worship and brought the Mosaic law (Ezra 7:10), although passages he quotes (Ezra 9:11 - 12 and Nehemiah 8:14 - 15) are not in the version of the Pentateuch we possess. We should note here that some scholars believe Ezra may have returned under Artaxerxes I prior to Nehemiah's first journey (contrast Ezra 7:7 with Nehemiah 2:1 - the Artaxerxes in question is not identified as I or II) but the construction that posits Ezra's return as occurring under Artaxerxes II seems to make better sense of the account. Malachi probably prophesied sometime during this wave or the one prior to it. Scholars generally date his book anywhere from 500 to 400 BC.

Section A: Zechariah

Zechariah (the name means "the Lord is renowned" or "Yahweh remembers") was either the son of Berechiah who was himself the son of Iddo (Zechariah 1:1), or Zechariah was simply the son of Iddo (Ezra 5:1; 6:14). Some scholars have suggested that this apparent discrepancy can be attributed to scribal error, the scribes who copied Zechariah's prophecy having confused Zechariah, the son of Iddo, with Zechariah, the son of Jeberechiah (Isaiah 8:1), Berechiah being contained in the name Jeberechiah. Another Zechariah, this one the son of Jehoiada, who was stoned at the command of king Joash (II Chronicles 24:20 - 22) was certainly confused in Matthew 23:35 with Zechariah, son of Barachias (the Septuagint form of Berechiah). Zechariah is a fairly common name, so scribal confusion between the various Zechariahs is a possibility. Others scholars have suggested that Berechiah died when Zechariah was very young and that the boy was raised by his grandfather Iddo. Still others have noted that it is not uncommon in genealogies for generations to be skipped over so

that grandfathers or even great grandfathers are sometimes called the fathers of their grandchildren or great grandchildren. Whatever the actual case, we know that as a descendent of priests, Zechariah was himself a priest which makes his concern for the temple unsurprising. But Zechariah's concern goes far beyond the restoration of the temple. More than any other prophet except Isaiah, Zechariah's prophecies deal with the expected messiah. Those prophecies are 3:8 and 6:12 - 13 which we shall consider together; 9:9; 9:16; 11:10 - 14; 12:10; and 13:1. Zechariah 13:6 has traditionally been interpreted as having a messianic reference, an interpretation which, as we shall see, is problematic. In addition we will look at passages 4:6; 7:9 - 11; and 12:1.

Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, thou, and thy fellows that sit before thee: for they are men wondered at: for, behold, I will bring forth my servant the BRANCH.

Zechariah 3:8

And speak unto him, saying, Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, Behold the man whose name is The BRANCH; and he shall grow up out of his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord: even he shall build the temple of the Lord; and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne: and he shall be a priest upon his throne: and the counsel of peace shall be between them both.

Zechariah 6:12 - 13

We have already referred to the first of these passages when we discussed Jeremiah 25:5 - 6 and we pointed out there how by the time of Zechariah references to "the Branch" which both Isaiah and Jeremiah made were understood to have messianic significance. In Zechariah 3:8 we are told that the Branch will be God's servant while in Zechariah 6:12 - 13 we are told that he will build the temple of the Lord, shall bear the glory, sit and rule as both king and priest, and that the counsel of peace (or "peaceful understanding" - RSV) shall exist between, as the ASV puts it, the offices of priest and king.

Growing up out of his place suggests a maturing into his role and calls to mind the passage in Luke that "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52. See also Luke 13:32). Bearing his glory prefigures Christ's glorification. His action of sitting upon his throne points to the phrase in Hebrews that he "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3), sitting pointing to the completion of his task (of redemption). Ruling indicates his royal authority and his continuing engagement with his creation as its Lord. And his fulfilling the office of both priest and king suggests his all-sufficiency and points to Christ's superiority to Moses.

When Moses (a Levite) was told to be a leader of his people before the Egyptians, he demurred, saying that he was unable to speak well (Exodus 4:10), and asked God to send another person (Exodus 4:13). God became angry with Moses (Exodus 4:14) but agreed to send his brother Aaron with him as his spokesperson (Exodus 4:14 - 16). It was through the Levites that the law came, it was the Levites in the person of Aaron who connived with the people in their idolatry (Exodus 32:1 - 5); it was the Levites in the person of Moses who interceded for the people (Exodus 32:13); it was the Levites who, in order to demonstrate their faithfulness to God, took swords and killed three thousand men in retribution for the people's nakedness which Aaron himself had commanded (Exodus 32:25 - 27); and finally it was the Levites who were consecrated to the Lord's service (Numbers, chapter 8). Indeed the entire Mosaic covenant was introduced through the tribe of Levi and was administered by them. Yet the kings of Israel came through Judah. By combining the two offices, Christ fulfilled and superseded the covenant of Moses, a king being higher than a priest.

Then he answered and spake unto me, saying, this is the word of the Lord unto Zerubbabel, saying, Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts.

Zechariah 4:6

Zerubbabel (the name means “descended of Babylon” and suggests that he was born there) was the son of Shealtiel (Ezra 3:2) and a descendant of David (I Chronicles 3:19 lists him as the son of Pediah, Shealtiel’s brother). Appointed by Cyrus as governor of Judah (Haggai 2:21), his task was to build the temple. He and Jeshua or Joshua, the high priest, did lay the foundation (Ezra 3:8 - 10), but were prevented from doing more than that by groups (i.e. the Samaritans) who had remained in the land and who had continued the sacrifices since the Assyrians had captured Samaria (Ezra 4:1 - 6). It seems probable here that those groups interpreted the return of the exiles as God’s reward for the faithfulness they had shown in continuing to sacrifice to him while the exiles themselves understood their return as a reward for their own faithfulness during those years under Babylon and their diligence in purifying their faith. Although the account in Scripture is somewhat difficult to follow and there seem to be several passages which are out of order, something like this apparently happened:

The Samaritans succeeded in stopping further work on the temple through the remainder of Cyrus’ life. Cyrus died in 530/29 BC. He was succeeded by his son Bardiya (Smerdis in Greek) who was deposed and executed by his brother Cambyses. In 529 BC Cambyses who had led his army south to conquer Egypt decisively defeated the forces of the new Pharaoh Psamtik III in the battle of Pelusium. Psamtik was captured and treated with leniency but later led a revolt against the Persians. This time Cambyses executed Psamtik when he put down the revolt. He then led an expedition south to Nubia and Ethiopia but failed to conquer land there. Appointing Aryandes as satrap of Egypt, Cambyses returned to Persia but on the way was told that Gaumata, a usurper using the name Bardiya, had seized the throne. Cambyses died in route to Persia in 521, possibly by suicide.

Darius I, also known as Darius the Great, was a royal prince though not directly descended from Cyrus and had been Cambyses’ spear-bearer in Egypt. He assumed control of the army after Cambyses’ death, marched into Persia, and captured and executed Gaumata in September. He would rule until 485 and was the guiding genius of the Persian (also known as the Achaemenid) Empire, a state which minted money, built roads, emphasized commerce, and based its authority on both its military might and a system of law. In many respects the empire over which Darius I ruled was the first genuinely “world empire” and his ideas for administering it were to influence both the Romans and King Asoka of India. Those Persian emperors who followed him, Xerxes I who was also known as Ahasuerus (485 - 464) and his successor Artaxerxes (464 - 423), were unable to duplicate the achievements of Darius I and allowed the empire to stagnate.

The early years of Darius’ reign were troubled by widespread revolts but it is uncertain what if any direct impact this had on the Jews. The Scriptural account portrays Darius in a positive light, suggesting that despite these disturbances, he was favorably disposed to the Jew’s building project, and the apocryphal I Esdras 6:23 - 34 says that Darius confirmed Cyrus’ decree, a statement that reinforces the biblical account. Zechariah and Haggai, concerned to proclaim to Zerubbabel that his circumstances were firmly in the hand of the Lord and that the task at hand would be completed not by human strength but by the strength of God, prophesied at this time.

Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, Execute true judgment, and show mercy and compassions every man to his brother: and oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart.

Zechariah 7:9 - 10

Zechariah is recapping for his hearers the reason for the exile. Hence his words are reminiscent of ones we considered earlier when we discussed Micah 6:8. Such admonitions are common throughout Scripture. James may well have had this passage of Zechariah in mind when he wrote:

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless

and the widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

James 1:27

However as we know and as we read in the next two verses of Zechariah the people paid no heed. They covered their ears and made their hearts as adamant stone. This indicates that they actively rejected a message they considered unbearable! Is it not remarkable that an admonition to judge truthfully, to show mercy, to keep oneself pure, and to be kind inspires such a hostile response? With God on their side, the Israelites wanted greatness. What God offered was goodness. Disappointed, they turned to other gods who they hoped could make them lords of all they surveyed. And in that turning they lost both greatness and goodness. Their reaction and God's response is the theme of the Old Testament, but it is the theme as well of all of fallen humanity.

We, the fallen ones, always long for greatness, a greatness we seek to forge for ourselves only in reference to others like us and not with proper regard for God. We are forever founding empires or scaling mountains or writing books or peering into the heart of things in search of the new and astonishing. And we sincerely celebrate (and just as sincerely envy) those who excel at such feats. But kindness, mercy, purity, spiritual truth do not impress us as much. Offered a choice between eternity with God and a bowl of lentils, we sarcastically choose the soup. And that is why we are punished.

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, they King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.

Zechariah 9:9

Matthew 21:5 and John 12:14 - 15 specifically refer to this passage as being fulfilled when Jesus staged his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, an entry we commemorate each Palm Sunday. I use the word staged here because it is clear that Jesus engineered the event with the intent of calling to mind this passage from Zechariah, a strong indication of his own awareness of his messianic status. Also Jesus came not as a conqueror riding on a powerful steed but humbly and riding on a beast of burden, indicating his servant status. The youth of the ass (it was a colt on which no one had ever sat - Luke 19:30) illustrates the new beginning Jesus instituted with his triumphal entry, a triumph secured without armies yet which would transform the cosmos.

The Hebrew reads "riding on an ass [that is a *chamor*, male ass], and upon a colt the foal of an ass [a *'athown*, a female ass]." Matthew renders the prophecy "sitting upon an ass [an *onos*, sex unspecified], and a colt the foal of an ass [a *hupozugion*, an animal under the yoke, a draught animal, again sex unspecified]." In one of the strangest criticisms of this passage I have ever come across, Prof. 'Abdu 'I-Ahad Dawud in his book *Muhammad in the Bible* (written early this century and in 1980 reissued by the Presidency of Shariyah Courts and Religious Affairs in Doha, Qatar) argues that both *onos* and *hupozugion* designate a female animal and hence Matthew presents the ridiculous spectacle of Jesus riding into Jerusalem mounted on two beasts simultaneously (Chapter VII, p. 85), a point he insists is most serious since it reflects negatively on the validity of Christian scriptures (Chapter VIII, p. 94). The repetition of the phrase in the Hebrew text is a classic example of Hebrew parallelism, and Matthew renders that nicely. John simply collapses the passage to read: "...thy King cometh, sitting on an ass's colt" (John 12:15). The idea that *onos* and/or *hupozugion* are necessarily female seems to be a figment of Prof. Dawud's imagination but even if he is right, the argument as he has constructed it has no validity. Surely it would not imply that Jesus rode on two creatures at the same time but that he rode on a female ass that was the foal of a female ass (Hebrew parallelism). But that Prof. Dawud makes the argument and rests so much upon it illustrates how different from ours is the Muslims' view of inspiration. Here is a wooden literalism that puts even the most stalwart Christian fundamentalist to shame!

**And the Lord their God shall save them in that day as the flock of his people:
for they shall be as the stones of a crown, lifted up as an ensign upon his land.**

Zechariah 9:16

Background verses here are Isaiah 11:6 - 9 and 65:25, both of which we have already discussed, Jeremiah 31:12 - 14, and Ezekiel 34:25 - 31, part of which we have discussed. These verses are part of that scriptural complex of verses we might think of as millennial passages.

Millennium is derived from the Latin *mil* (1000)+ *biennium* (a period of two years) = *millennium*. Because the Greek word *chilioi* also means one thousand, doctrines about this thousand year period can be called either chiliastic or millenarian doctrines.

The idea of the millennium is based on a single text: Revelation 20:1 - 9 in which Satan is seized and bound for a thousand years (20:2 - 3). While Satan is bound those to whom judgment is given shall reign with resurrected people who were beheaded for not worshipping the beast (2:4). The resurrection of these beheaded people is known as the first resurrection (20:5). At the end of the millennium Satan shall be loosed to summon Gog and Magog for a battle (20:7 - 8) "against the beloved city" but those gathered hordes will be destroyed by fire from heaven (20:9).

The millennium will be a period during which Christ reigns as contrasted to his first advent when he served, but how are we to understand that reign? Historically there have been three interpretations. The early church expected Christ to return within a few generations of his resurrection, and they expected that he would establish his millennial kingdom upon his return. This idea, that the millennium would follow the return of Christ, is called premillennialism: pre since Christ will return before the millennium. However, as the generations passed and Christ did not return, a problem called the delayed parousia (or second coming), other ideas began to develop. Origen (circa 185 - 254), a theologian of the Alexandrian school in Egypt, suggested that the millennium should be understood not as a cataclysmic event breaking into history but as the birth of the kingdom of God in the soul of each believer. Augustine (354 - 430), building upon Origen's views, suggested that the millennium was to be understood as the reign of Christ via the Holy Spirit in the church. This allegorical view of the millennium dominated for most of the church's history and is known as amillennialism meaning that there will be no literal millennium. Postmillennialism, developing during the eighteenth century and dominating much of the theology of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is the idea that the church itself through the mission movement, through the social gospel, and through other forms of witness will gradually Christianize society, bringing in the millennium at which point Christ will return to reign. While *The Harper Study Bible* in its footnote on Revelation 20 traces the origins of postmillennialism back to the fifth century by interpreting Augustine in a postmillennial fashion, this construction seems somewhat eccentric. In *The City of God* Book XX, Chapter 8 Augustine makes it plain that he believed the Devil was bound when the church moved beyond Judea into other nations and would remain so until the end of this age. Since the binding of Satan marks the advent of the millennium, Augustine's position is classical amillennialism.

Though the immediate context of the Zechariah passage is the defeat of Greece (9:13) and seems to have been fulfilled in one sense with the overthrow of the Seleucids by the Maccabees in the second century BC, there is another sense in which this verse awaits a further fulfillment, and it is in that second sense that it becomes a millennial prophecy. The transition occurs beginning with 9:14 where we read that the Lord, blowing a trumpet, shall appear over his people. His arrow going forth like lightning is reminiscent of the fire falling on the armies surrounding Jerusalem to save his people. The entire visionary quality of the passage, employing, as it does, imagery found in other Second Coming texts suggests that Zechariah 9:16 has a millennial focus.

**And I took my staff, even Beauty, and cut it asunder, that I might break my
covenant which I had made with all the people. And it was broken in that day:**

and so the poor of the flock that waited upon me knew that it was the word of the Lord. And I said unto them, If ye think good, give me my price; and if not, forbear. So they weighed for my price thirty pieces of silver. And the Lord said unto me, Cast it unto the potter: a goodly price that I was prised at of them. And I took the thirty pieces of silver, and cast them to the potter in the house of the Lord. Then I cut asunder mine other staff, even Bands, that I might break the brotherhood between Judah and Israel.

Zechariah 11:10 - 14

Staff comes from the Hebrew word *maqelah* which means a walking stick or a divining rod with leaves on it. To the Jews the word would have suggested Aaron's rod which budded, emphasizing God's choice of Aaron after Korah rebelled and demanded a roll in the priestly services (see Numbers, chapters 16 and 17). The Hebrew word translated as Beauty is *no'am* which, being derived from *na'em* meaning "to be agreeable", suggests that quality in the sense that something agreeable is beautiful or pleasant. The word translated as Bands is *chebel* and comes from *chabal* meaning to wind tightly as a rope is wound tightly, or to bind as by a pledge. Hence *chebel* literally means a twisted rope and can be used figuratively to suggest a company bound together. Bands then indicates a condition of obligation as in the Scottish custom of publishing ones nuptial bands. The RSV renders the word as Union and translates *no'am* as Grace. The ASV and the NIV follow the RSV in using Union but prefer Favor for *no'am*.

Starting with Zechariah 11:4, God describes how he became the shepherd of a doomed flock and how he allowed that flock to be abused by worthless shepherds because the flock rejected him. He describes how, using the budding rods Beauty and Bands, he tended his flock, then, in the passage we are considering, he describes how he broke those rods, dissolving his covenant with the people as well as the union between Israel and Judah. Breaking his covenant with the people, he asks for his wages and they give him thirty pieces of silver, the price of a slave (see Exodus 21:32), money which the good shepherd contemptuously casts into the potter's house.

The thirty pieces of silver and the act of casting it into the potter's house foreshadow the price Judas was paid, and the chief priests spending that money, once Judas cast it into the temple, to purchase a potter's field to bury strangers in (Matthew 26:15; 27:3 - 8). As the Good Shepherd rejected the silver he was paid, so his betrayers rejected the wages of their betrayal. They got nothing for their labor but death. Judas embraced his own death by committing suicide. The chief priests embraced death by rejecting the messiah and even used the wages of betrayal to purchase a graveyard for strangers. Some Jews (Judas, the chief priests) rejected their messiah and some Jews (the disciples) followed him. This difference between the Jews recalls the division between Israel and Judah where Israel, to preserve its political autonomy, set up false alters. God has dissolved the union between the two. Simply being Jewish no longer assures one of a special place before God. For both Jew and Gentile what counts is one's relationship to Christ.

The burden of the word of the Lord for Israel, saith the Lord, which stretcheth forth the heavens, and layeth the foundations of the earth, and formeth the spirit of man within him.

Zechariah 12:1

The twelfth through the fourteenth chapters of Zechariah are an oracle, a divine communication from God in which he promises to cleanse Jerusalem, enter into a covenant with his people, and institute a worldwide reign. It is important to remember that the God who speaks through the prophets and makes such promises is the God who created even the most distant heavens, even the deepest parts of the world, even the inner life of humans. Again and again the prophets assert that God's authority over creation rests in his capacity as creator. It is strange that they should have to insist on this point since the Psalmist tells us that creation itself witnesses so unequivocally to God (Psalm 19:1; 97:6). Yet the prophets remind us of this so often because we who have grown deaf to the witness of creation tend to forget the words of the prophets. Our world seems mysterious and God seems

uninvolved and far away. But “seems” in this statement is a delusion. Our sin and the estrangement it has created between us and our world, between us and God, and between the world and God, plays a central role in maintaining that delusion and makes us deaf to the testimony of creation. Because we are sinners we need to be reminded that God creates and that God is involved in his creation and that we are who we are even in our most secret places because of God. Though exacerbated by modern secularism, this evil goes far beyond the evil of materialism, it is an evil as old as fallen humanity. All manner of deities except the true creator God have been credited with making the universe and then supplicated or ignored depending on the mythic tradition in which they developed. It is not enough to fashion a teleological argument to show design in nature, one requires revelation to focus that argument. One requires the prophet proclaiming what will be.

And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn.

Zechariah 12:10

We read in John 19:34 that the Roman soldiers pierced Christ’s side with a spear, Christ who was from the house of David. These were Roman soldiers enlisted from all the provinces of the empire. They are the army gathered from among “all the people of the earth” to come against Jerusalem (12:3), that city where the church began as God’s grace was poured out on its inhabitants and they, contemplating the crucified messiah, “were pricked in their heart” (that is, they mourned) and asked Peter and the rest of the apostles what they should do (Acts 2:37).

In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness.

Zechariah 13:1

This passage refers to the sacrifice for Christ, a descendent of David, outside the gates of Jerusalem on the day of atonement as the Paschal lambs were being slaughtered in the temple.

And one shall say unto him, What are these wounds in thine hands? Then he shall answer, Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends.

Zechariah 13:6

Though traditionally interpreted as applying to Jesus, this verse lacks a clear messianic focus. Context is the problem. The Hebrew word for hand here is *yad* meaning an opened hand, but *yad* can be used to suggest many things. As the preceding verses relate God’s intention to “cause the prophets and the unclean spirit to pass out of the land” (13:2) and as we know from I Kings 18:28 that such prophets often slashed themselves in frenzy, most modern commentators believe that the person addressed is a false prophet and that rather than wounds in his hands, his inquisitors are referring to wounds between his hands. Hence the RSV renders the phrase as “wounds on your back”, the ASV as “wounds between your arms”, and the NIV as “wounds on your body”. It is not *yad* itself that is translated but what *yad* seems to suggest within its setting. If one chooses the KJV version and isolates the passage from its background, then its messianic import is striking, which is the reason it is so often associated with Jesus. But due to the problems created by the passage’s immediate frame of reference, more recent versions of the Scriptures are translated so as to discourage readers from applying the verse to Christ. However, though muted in those versions, the implication that Christ is meant does not vanish entirely. After all, Jesus was punched, whipped, and crowned with thorns, and did have wounds over his entire body. And one remembers how Matthew, in what would appear to be a flagrant disregard for all rules of interpretation, plucked Jeremiah 31:15 out of its context and saw in Rehal’s weeping a prophetic reference to Herod’s slaughter of the innocents.

Section B: Haggai

Haggai (or Chaggi, the name comes from *chag* [“festival” or “victim”] and means “my feast” or “festal”) was a contemporary with Zechariah. Prophesying between August and December 520 BC he saw the completion of the temple as a necessary preparation for the coming messiah. Nothing else is known about him. Indeed the book itself may not record the prophet’s exact words since its brevity and its prosaic quality indicate that in its present form it might be only a summary of the prophet’s original message. The temple was completed by the spring of 515.

Two passages, Haggai 1:9 and 2:8 - 9, are fairly well known, and one, Haggai 2:23, presents something of a problem. We will be considering these three verses.

Ye looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the Lord of hosts. Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house.

Haggai 1:9

Through the prophet the Lord commanded his people to begin work on the temple immediately (1:8). They were to act as zealously for God as they had acted for themselves. The prophet then speaks of priorities. Looking after their own affairs and neglecting those of God, the people had failed to prosper. God here reminds his faithless people that he is the Lord of prosperity and though they seek riches, those riches will not come if the Lord does not bless their work. In this case their work was to build the temple, something they had postponed for almost two decades, a failure that suggested more than disobedience, it suggested a lack of confidence in God (recall the Samaritans hindered them and they allowed themselves to be hindered). By frustrating their prudent efforts to insure their own security, God was reminding them of his control of the fruits of their labor regardless of how prudently they acted.

It is easy to misunderstand this lesson. In the Greco-Roman world of which the Jews were shortly to become so important a part, success alone was judged evidence of the gods’ favor, failure alone evidence of their disfavor. There was no moral component mitigating this perception. The worst rogue, if successful, was judged to be in favor with the gods. The most virtuous person, if a failure, was judged to be in disfavor. The Jews also believed that prosperity, which God had promised if the Israelites adhered to their end of the covenant, was a sign of God’s favor. While the Jews were well aware that the unrighteous might prosper for a little while, they also believed that righteousness would itself be rewarded with prosperity in this life. Consequently, one’s poverty reflected on one’s moral character. By the time of Christ, the Jews, like the Gentiles had come to believe that poverty was an indicator of divine disfavor, prosperity of divine approval. The poverty of Jesus as well as some of the parables he told (for example, the parable of the fool who built bigger barns) struck at the root of this conceit. If the sinless one knew poverty and suffering, why should any of us expect our lives to be different, especially if we purpose to walk in his footsteps?

The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, saith the Lord of hosts. The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the Lord of hosts: and in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of hosts.

Haggai 2:8 - 9

When the foundation of the temple was laid, there was much joy among the Jews, but those among them who could remember the splendor of Solomon’s temple wept (Ezra 3:11 - 12) because the second temple was so inferior to the first (Haggai 2:3). Yet God reminds the people that he is the one who owns the silver and the gold and that the temple which will be built will surpass Solomon’s

temple in glory. Solomon's temple when Solomon ruled was splendid, but no one alive when the foundations of the second temple were laid remembered the original majesty of that temple. What they remembered was the temple after it had been looted several times.

There are two ways of interpreting this prophecy. First, one may understand God as talking of a literal temple. If this is what is meant, there are two possibilities: a temple that existed or a temple that will exist. It is unquestionably true that the second temple, once expanded and rebuilt by Herod (so complete was this rebuilding that Herod's temple is sometimes called the third temple), surpassed Solomon's in glory. Indeed, it was the largest structure in the Greco-Roman world. It also housed a taxing body that amassed a huge quantity of silver and gold, and this was a taxing body people were pleased to support as the story of the widow's mite suggests. Indeed archeologists working in Cave 3 of the Qumran Caves discovered a unique record of the temple's wealth: a scroll of copper on which is engraved sixty-four hiding places for the temple's treasure as well as the amounts of silver and gold secreted at each location. J.T. Milik, the scholar who published the contents of the Copper Scroll, estimated that it listed 4,630 talents of gold and silver. Talents could vary in weight, measuring between 25 to 75 pounds. Hence the treasure recorded in the Copper Scroll amounted to somewhere between 58 to 174 tons,¹ and this amount was probably collected by the Jews between 70 and 90 AD (when Emperor Nerva discovered the booty and confiscated it), that is, after the second temple was destroyed!² The problem here is that despite its unquestioned splendor, no one really believed that Herod's temple represented the temple promised by God. Dispensationalists argue that the anticipated temple is the one described in Ezekiel and will be erected during the millennium. That conjecture is problematic on several grounds, the most obvious being Christ's elimination of the sacrificial system as described in the book of Hebrews.

This brings us to the second interpretation: that the prophecy was fulfilled in the person of Christ, that the temple referred to is a spiritual temple. Even before the destruction of Herod's temple in 70 AD it was commonly acknowledged in first century Judaism that the temple could assume a spiritual form, especially since the Jews did not believe that Herod's temple was the one promised by God, and one can find references to such an idea in both the New Testament and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Jesus' references to himself as the temple (implied in the story of the cleansing of the ten lepers: Luke 17:11 - 18 and in his reference to raising up the temple in three days: John 2:19 - 21) suggest this is the proper understanding. And of course through Jesus, God gave peace.

We should also note that Paul, basing his observation on the idea that faith is a gift (Ephesians 2:8) and that through this gift of faith Christ dwells in the believer (Ephesians 3:17, expanded the concept to include the body of the believer (I Corinthians 6:19 and II Corinthians 6:16 are examples that come to mind).

And in that day, saith the Lord of hosts, will I take thee, O Zerubbabel, my servant, the son of Shealtiel, saith the Lord, and will make thee as a signet: for I have chosen thee, saith the Lord of host.

Haggai 2:23

A signet is a small seal used for legal documents and hence is a symbol of authority. It was often worn as a finger ring (see Jeremiah 22:24). The phrase "in that day" has messianic overtones, and coupled with authority being promised to a chosen descendant of David, strongly suggests that Haggai, though he does not actually identify Zerubbabel as the messiah, probably thought Zerubbabel was to be the messiah. Yet not only was Zerubbabel not the messiah, he never attained to any position of real, independent power. Therefore whatever Haggai's actual expectations, it seems plain to us that rather than being the messiah, Zerubbabel pointed toward the messiah and served to

¹ *Biblical Archaeology Review*, November/December 1993, "26 Tons of Gold and 65 Tons of Silver" by James E. Harper, pp. 44 - 45

² *Ibid.*, "Where the Temple Tax Was Buried" by Manfred R. Lehmann, pp. 39, 42 - 43

underline the importance the second temple had as a preparation for the messiah. Indeed, he appears in the genealogy of Christ (Matthew 1:12 and Luke 3:27) as Zorobabel, the Greek form of his name.

Section C: Malachi

The name Malachi comes from the Hebrew word *mal'ak* meaning to dispatch as a messenger, and can indicate a prophet, teacher, or angel. Malachi occurs only once in the entire corpus of Scripture: in the first verse of the book of Malachi. Hence, it might not be a name at all but a title. Not surprisingly, nothing is known of Malachi's life. Not even his prophecy can be dated with any certainty with commentators placing it between 500 and 397 BC (this last date can be found in *The Thompson Chain-Reference Bible*). Probably he preached around the time of Nehemiah's second visit to Jerusalem, a visit during which Nehemiah "cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah" who had prepared for himself "a chamber in the courts of the house of God" (Nehemiah 13:7 - 8). Nehemiah commanded that the chambers be cleaned (13:9) and embarked on a general purification of the temple and the religious practice associated with it. As Malachi's message concerns faithfulness to God and the importance of spiritual worship, it compliments Nehemiah's program which is the reason it is usually assigned to this period of history.

Though listed last in the prophets, Malachi was also the last of the Old Testament prophets to prophesy. His book is short, and yet it is the source for no less than nine well known passages.

**I have loved you, saith the Lord. Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us?
Was not Esau Jacob's brother? saith the Lord: yet I loved Jacob, and I hated
Esau, and laid his mountains and his heritage waste for the dragons of the
wilderness.**

Malachi 1:2 - 3

I loved Jacob, I hated Esau. Some commentators try to soften the statement by suggesting that Jacob and Esau are not individuals but nations and that loving and hating have more to do with divine favor than with divine feelings. In other words, according to such commentators, all that God is saying is that he chose Jacob (that is, the nation of Israel) over Esau (that is, the nation of Edom). But Scripture does not allow us to distinguish between individuals and their descendants in quite so facile a way. Throughout the Old Testament individuals and the nations they father are closely identified, and God's evaluation of the founder of a nation usually determines the destiny of that nation. Hence when God favors one people over another his choice has enduring repercussions. Israel whether in the person of the Jews or in his universalized form as the church is still with us today. Edom, as we saw in Obadiah's prophecy, was destined for destruction, conquered by the Nabataeans, conquered again by the Maccabees, exalted under the Romans, and then absorbed by the currents of history. Finally, the words used here are significant. When God says that he loved Jacob, he is not simply saying that he chose Jacob in some unemotional and calculated way. He is using the Hebrew word *'ahab* which means to have affection for another, either in a sexual way or like a friend. There is an active emotional element in that word. And when God says he hated Esau, we again find the emotional element. God uses the Hebrew word *sane'* which means he hates Esau as his personal enemy, that is he considers Esau a despised foe. The language used here is the strongest. And it has, as Paul points out in the ninth chapter of Romans, deep theological meaning. Paul says that God chose Jacob (the younger) over Esau (the older) even before the children were born and before they had done anything good or bad and that God does this to demonstrate that his election is effected not by works but by his call, and Paul specifically refers to this passage in Malachi to illustrate his point (Romans 9:10 - 13). This offends our deepest sense of justice. Surely it is wrong for God to make such determinations before the children have had a chance to prove or reveal themselves. In the forty-seventh chapter of his travelogue *The Innocents Abroad* in which he chronicled his adventures in the Holy Land during 1867, Mark Twain celebrates Esau's "sublime generosity" and "noble character" in forgiving the brother who had so wronged him and contrasts Esau favorably with

Joseph because Joseph forgave his ragged and starving brothers from his position of authority, glory, and prosperity while Esau though still outcast forgave Jacob who had robbed him of both his birthright and his blessing. From one perspective Mark Twain's objection has merit. But God sees things from a different perspective. Jacob understood the value of Esau's birthright and coveted it for himself. Esau held his birthright in contempt (Hebrews 12:16). What motivated Esau was gratification in this world. As long as he was gratified, he was satisfied. In his own mind he had done quite well without either the birthright or the blessing. Jacob having acquired both spent many years in exile. And Esau, when Jacob met him in the desert, was hardly the outcast and poverty-ridden figure Mark Twain describes. He truly had enough, a situation he must have relished as it seemed to justify his original contempt for his privileges as first born. Did his prosperity not prove that he had the fortitude to make his own way despite the schemes of his cunning brother? Jacob with his speckled herd, his small retinue, and his limp must have appeared a poor figure to Esau. What could be easier under those circumstances than to reject Jacob's gifts? Time had made Esau no wiser and he still failed to understand what it was he had lost. He and his posterity remained spiritually blind. When the pagan Herod in order to curry favor with the Jews built a splendid temple to honor their God, he was acting as a true son of his ancient father who remained enthralled to the glitter of the fallen world.

From the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the Lord of hosts.

Malachi 1:11

This is clearly a prophecy in the sense that it provides information about what will happen, and, since it predicts a time when the temple will no longer be central to worship and the Jews will no longer have unique access to God, it is one of the most remarkable prophecies in the Bible. There was nothing unusual about claiming that the Gentiles would eventually recognize the God of Abraham as their own God, but such prophecies usually entailed the provision that the Gentiles would worship by coming to Jerusalem. This prophecy makes no such claim. Instead it suggests that true worship complete with incense (which is associated with and is a symbol of prayer, see Psalm 141:2 and Revelation 8:3 - 4) and a pure offering (i.e. Christ) will be conducted all day everywhere. What need then of a temple?

For the Lord, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away: for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the Lord of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously.

Malachi 2:16

Putting away here means divorce. God hates all sin but he specifically hates divorce. This passage in Malachi tells us so. Those Malachi addresses have failed to honor the covenant they made when they married (2:14 -15). The purpose of marriage as stated here is to raise godly children (2:15), but that purpose is subverted if the husband is unfaithful to his wife. It is also subverted if one's spouse is not a believer. Christ's words in Matthew 5:31 - 32 are sometimes interpreted to mean that adultery is grounds for divorce. Jesus does not actually say that. What he says is that he who puts away his wife save for fornication causes her to commit adultery. That is true on two levels. First, it is true since, if she is a fornicator, she has already committed adultery. Consequently putting her away does not cause her to commit the sin she has already committed. Second, it is true in the sense that a marriage is put together by God and dissolving that union is an affront to God. The marriage relationship is sacred and via the covenant that seals it serves as a symbol of the relationship between God and Israel in the Old Testament and Jesus and his church in the New Testament. Hence marriage may survive adultery even as the covenant between God and the faithless Israelites survived their persistent idolatry. The divine side of marriage may even sanctify the unbelieving partner, but we know from the tenth chapter of Ezra and from Paul's words to the Corinthian church (1

Corinthians 7:15 and II Corinthians 6:14 - 15) that religious infidelity is grounds for divorce. God hates divorce, but in the end divorce is preferable to intimate union with an unbelieving partner.

Ye have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet ye say, Wherein have we wearied him? When ye say, Everyone that doeth evil is good in the sight of the Lord and he delighteth in them; or Where is the God of judgment?

Malachi 2:17

Surely the contemporary church in the West needs to hear these words! Conceiving of God's love in the most unbiblically nonjudgmental way, we have become extremely reluctant to address issues of sin, particularly sexual sin, in our larger society and in the church itself. In part this is probably due to technological advances that have made sex without pregnancy commonplace and therefore encouraged people to think of sex as a means of inconsequential self-gratification. But the social impact of promiscuity has been anything but inconsequential. Divorce rates have soared. Venereal disease had by the early 1970s reached epidemic proportions among Western youth and, in the form of AIDS which began to make itself felt in the early 1980s, has today become the grist of a global political debate. Prostitution is an increasingly accepted profession in the US and Europe. Sex-tourism with Asian children as its most common victims is a booming business. At the time of this writing (February 1997) the rate of teenage pregnancy in the United States, though declining, remains the highest in the industrialized world. Condoms are dispensed at high schools as though the students were soldiers going on pass. In the midst of this calamity, Protestant churches wink at fornication, sanctify divorce, assert the right of women to chose abortion as a liberated form of contraception, celebrate the use of fetal tissue in medical research and treatment, perform marriage ceremonies for homosexuals, and even ordain homosexuals. Not since the Catholic Church failed to adequately address the institution of the mistress has the Western Church so completely abnegated its responsibility to decry sin. More distressing, this remarkable delinquency among Protestant churches is predicated upon the proposition that God is love!

Such love finds no scriptural authority. Instead we read that "whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth." (Hebrews 12:6) Indeed, the writer of Hebrews goes on to say "...if ye be without chastisement, ...then are ye bastards, and not sons." (Hebrews 12:8) That is the gospel of the non-judgmental god, the gospel of bastards.

Almost as an aside the late David Macdonald Paton in his *Christian Missions and the Judgment of God* (first published in 1953 and reissued by William B. Eerdmans in 1996) argues that the family is something we as Christians are required to foster and that political decisions which weaken or destroy the family are fundamentally un-Christian.³ In the West and around the world, Christians, with the tacit complicity of their churches, have been making decisions which are fundamentally un-Christian. As a consequence families have been torn apart, the children of Christians have become corrupted and depraved, and ministers remain curiously mute about the subject. One dares not mention sin or judgment. In what is surely one of the most remarkable ironies of our contemporary world, the metaphysics of evolution which presupposes massive extinction is assumed to be the creative action of a deity who refuses to judge his creation! After all, God looked upon his creation and called it good. What more was there to do?

Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts.

Malachi 3:1

³ Paton, David Macdonald, *Christian Missions and the Judgment of God*, Chapter 1 "The Christian Today", p. 58

Jesus, quoting this passage in Matthew 11:10, refers it to John the Baptist. It is not very clear to us living two thousand years later just what the importance of John the Baptist was. Of course he was the forerunner announcing that the kingdom of God was at hand, associating the coming of the kingdom with God's immanent judgment, and urging his hearers to repent. The Synoptic Gospels and Slavonic Version of Josephus (which may or may not be authentic) agree on this point. And John urged his hearers to be righteous, that is to adopt a moral lifestyle. Again the Synoptics and Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* XVIII, Chapter 5:2) agree. This last point is associated with the new way in which John baptized. A Jew might baptize himself and do so frequently because Jewish baptism was of primarily ritual significance, but John himself baptized those who came to him (baptism by a second party became a practice Christians adopted) and associated it with repentance, meaning that for John baptism had a primarily ethical significance and symbolized one's dependence on another to express or effect that ethical significance. Yet John continued his work after the advent of Christ, not all of John's followers abandoned him when Jesus arrived (although John seems to have encouraged them to do exactly that, see John 3:22 - 30), and communities tracing their origin to John's ministry continued through much of the first century and possibly into the third century, so there must have been more to John's message.

Indeed, John's and Jesus' relationship apparently goes deeper than John's baptism of Jesus and John's proclamation of the coming kingdom. The birth narrative as recorded in Luke, Jesus' move to Galilee after John was arrested, Jesus' contact with John while John was in prison, and Jesus' withdrawal to the desert upon hearing of John's execution, all suggest an enduring and important attachment between the two, but the precise nature of that association remains elusive. Some scholars posit that both John and Jesus may have been involved at some point with the Qumran community. A stronger case can be made for John's involvement with the Qumran sect than can be made for Jesus', yet here, too, scholars are divided. There are those who treat John's connection with the Qumran sect as though it were almost axiomatic while others insist the links are tenuous and still others deny any direct relationship between the Qumran community and the Dead Sea scrolls, arguing that there was no community as such or that its purposes were primarily secular. As is so often the case with Scripture, the record suggests more than it reveals. Such ambiguity points to Scripture's roots in historical events and makes theology a practical necessity rather than an esoteric pursuit.

Whatever the bond between them was, it is clear that Jesus considered John his inferior. When addressing the crowd concerning John, Jesus said:

Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Matthew 11:11

Much discussion over whether or not Jesus considered John a Christian has been occasioned by these words. Such debate revolves around the wrong question. It is clear that what is meant is that while John is the greatest of the prophets insofar as he proclaims the immediate presence of Jesus and even ministers to Jesus, he represents the culmination of the Mosaic covenant, and that the privileges secured by the covenant Jesus has come to establish are so much better than those secured under the previous one that the lowest beneficiary of the new covenant is far better off than the greatest prophet of the old.

For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.

Malachi 3:6

God's unchanging nature is stressed here. The Jews would have understood from God's revelation of himself as I AM THAT I AM (Exodus 3:14), that God in his essence was unaffected by his

creation, that by bringing himself into being he did not change. The theological term for this is *aseity*. Aseity (a word of Latin origin: *a* meaning out of and *se* meaning self) conveys the idea that God derives from himself or is self-existent. However, we also know that God is a living and active presence in his creation. Hence it is tempting even today for theologians, by assuming that God is in some way affected by his creation, to allow for change in God. Process theology associated with philosophers like Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne is an example of a contemporary paradigm positing divine mutability. Here Malachi asserts God's immutability. The passage can be paraphrased "Because I who create myself do not change, I do not change." And because God's character is secured in himself, his people can be sure that his judgments are not capricious.

Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing that there shall not be room enough to receive it.

Malachi 3:10

The people had been unfaithful. They had not given those tithes and offerings required of them, and in this way they had robbed God (Malachi 3:8 - 9). But rather than punishing them, God responded by graciously bargaining with them in a spirit reminiscent of Isaiah 1:18 "Come now, and let us reason together..." which we discussed earlier. The willingness of God to dialogue with his people is one of the most exciting aspects of being in covenant with God. Those with whom God covenants are invited into a relationship with God unknown to those outside the covenant. This, not some materialistic principle of so-called "seed faith" where God offers a monetary reward to encourage obedience in his people, is what Malachi is talking about here. Obedience in return for payment is not the central lesson of the passage. The important point of the passage is the graciousness of God in offering the bargain, an offer possible only because of the divine/human dialogue secured by covenant. Another name for this divine/human dialogue is prayer.

In the seventeenth chapter of his classic *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (first published in 1885), Andrew Murray, a leader in the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, described prayer as participation in the inner life of the Holy Trinity. In other words, prayer is more than supplication, more than repentance, more than worship and praise, it is communion with God. And because Christ alone under the new covenant makes such communion possible, only Christians are privileged to enjoy this kind of intimacy with God. Were Christians more adequately appraised of the unique nature of their standing in Christ, there would have been no furor created in 1980 when Baily Smith, then President of the Southern Baptist Convention, stated while attending a Religious Roundtable sponsored by the televangelist James Robison, "God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew." The issue is not one of tribalism as scholars like Winthrop S. Hudson (who should know better) have suggested.⁴ It is instead a religious question of covenant and privilege within the covenant. Of course God does not "hear the prayer of a Jew" or of any practitioner of a non-Christian faith. It is only to Christians that God offers such communion.

In his poem "Legacy" about the death of his grandmother, Michael Gearhart confesses to himself if not to his father that he does not know how to pray. Sadly his admission is true of too many of us who, like him, have also quit trying. We know through the writings by people like Saint John of the Cross that the participation in the divine which the pantheistic mystic vainly attempts to achieve through meditation is via Christ available to Christians when they pray, yet few believers avail themselves of the privilege. Nevertheless, as long as the covenant established by Christ stands, all Christians are welcomed.

But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness rise with

⁴ Hudson, Winthrop S., *Religion in America*, Part IV "Modern America", Chapter 17 "The New Pluralism and the Search for a New Consensus", pp. 400 - 401

healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth and grow up as calves of the stall.

Malachi 4:2

We know from passages like II Samuel 23:4, Psalms 84:11, and Isaiah 60:1 that the Hebrews often compared God to the rising sun or to the sun itself. The image of the sun (or the morning) having wings was a common one in the Middle East and can also be found in Scripture (i.e. Psalm 139:9). The words rising and healing recall Christ as does the image of wings (see for example Luke 13:34) which is doubtless why Charles Wesley borrowed the image from this passage and applied it to Jesus in "Hark the Herald Angels Sing". The phrase "and grow up" found in the KJV is a translation of the Hebrew word *puwsh* which means to spread, to act proudly, to grow up, grow fat, or be scattered, and is rendered as "leaping" in the RSV, as "skip about" in the ASV, and as "leap like calves released" in the NIV based on its meaning to act proudly or be scattered which in the context suggests the gamboling or leaping of a newly freed calf. The passage assures those who fear God that they shall be vindicated and that they will rejoice in their vindication.

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.

Malachi 4:5 - 6

Malachi closes his prophecy by referring to the promise in Malachi 3:1 that God would send a messenger to prepare the way for the Lord. Here he identifies that messenger with Elijah. Moses, too, had promised that another prophet similar in authority to himself was coming. We read:

I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him.

Deuteronomy 18:18 - 19

While this passage from Moses can be interpreted to mean that God will raise up prophetic spokespersons rather than a particular prophet, it was not so understood by many Jews during the centuries immediately preceding the coming of Christ. This passage in Deuteronomy coupled with the promise in Malachi created among them a sense that a special prophet would come to announce a new and radical appearance of God, leading to a widespread expectation that Elijah would return to announce the coming of the Messiah. During the first decades of the second century BC Joshua ben Sira described in the forty-eighth chapter of the apocryphal Ecclesiasticus how Elijah was waiting for the time when he would return to calm the wrath of the Lord, turn the heart of the father to the son, and restore the tribes of Jacob, a clear reference to Malachi 4:5 - 6.

In Mark 6:14 - 16 we read that many Jews believed John the Baptist was the promised Elijah, an identification which Jesus affirms in Matthew 11:7 - 15. And in Matthew 17:10 - 13 Jesus reiterates that identification and sees John's death as a precursor to his own. Hence we may wonder why John denies the role (John 1:19 - 23), identifying himself not with the prophet promised in Malachi but with the one promised in Isaiah. Some commentators have suggested that John only had partial knowledge of the part he played (a supposition supported by his apparent wavering while he was in prison), others that he was denying only that he was literally Elijah but was by his reference to Isaiah 40:3 asserting that he did perform that function. The Jews had many traditions about the role of the coming prophet. There were those who expected that Jeremiah would be resurrected to restore the pot of manna, the ark of the covenant, and the tablets of the law which they believed he had hidden, a theme that has prowled the more eccentric purlieus of literature for centuries and appears most recently in *The Discovery of Heaven* by the Dutch novelist Harry Mulisch. There was also a widespread expectation that all the prophets would be resurrected during the days of the Messiah.

We are not told why John answered as he did so it is not possible to know, but perhaps in the light of the various traditions his denial, which because of the reference to the Isaiah passage is somewhat ambiguous, reflects his determination not to directly address the issues underlying such speculation but to allow subsequent events to reveal the true nature of the case.

Conclusion

The special prophets, as we have seen, spoke out of their immediate circumstances, but because they had a message for all humanity, that message was not confined by or defined by its historical context. These prophets understood that the covenant God had made with Israel had a universal dimension, and they understood, too, that a chosen leader anointed by God, a messiah, would be instrumental in actualizing that dimension. The prophets also understood that when the mission of the messiah was completed, creation, cursed by God for our sake, would be restored to its original blessed condition, and that this restoration was part of the universal significance of what appeared to be a selective and particular covenant with a single people.

Christianity, coalescing around the person of the messiah, emerged from Judaism, fulfilling and transforming it. Gone was the emphasis on a single people and their land, and a covenant framed within a law that ministered wrath and death. In its place was the final and fullest revelation of God offering salvation to the world. Gone was the sacrificial cultus with its incessant demand for animal blood and its hidden deity. In its place was the communion table and the invitation of an incarnate God who said that whosoever will may come. Gone was a religion of that strove toward righteousness. In its place was the gift of righteousness and full fellowship with God.

Prophecy is the bridge between the Old and New Testaments. As should be clear from this study, we quote the prophets selectively, but we do so because not all of what the prophets said is addressed directly to us. Prophecy has a multiple focus. The prophets spoke to the people of their time and to people of all times. They rebuked their hearers, warned them of God's judgment, encouraged them when they grew weary in crisis. The prophets also spoke at length about God's grace and mercy, assured their hearers that God was patient, understood their weaknesses, and would strengthen them when they failed. But whether the prophets proclaimed judgment or mercy, whether they addressed the moment or spoke of the distant promise, God's nature as caring and unchanging was their continual theme. Because God was both unchanging and creative, everything that happened secured God's purposes, and because God was jealous of his own and sought to do good to them, those who trusted in God could be sure that he was working in all things for their benefit.

Hence the prophets reveal that the universe is not closed to God's action. How could it be if God can speak to his people, answer their prayers (each answered prayer assumes some aspect of miracle), heal them, and save them? This means that all ideas predicated upon the belief that God will not or cannot act in this realm are false at a fundamental level, all models ranging from deism to secularism are wrong, all conclusions based on such models are suspect, and everyone who lives according to such models is liable on that account alone, regardless of how morally upright they may outwardly seem, to be judged. A world model which eliminates God is a lie and an idol. Lives based on such a model are vain.

The prophets as an actualized reality remain of central importance to our world. The fact of their existence by itself reveals how terribly off-center modernism is. As world cultures become increasingly post-modern and begin to rediscover the power of spiritual realities, a power so evident that only by robust acts of self-deception could it be ignored, we may anticipate that once again the prophets will be heeded and that, as in the past, those who listen to them will find them relevant and inspiring.

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The years wrap us unevenly
In their variegated textures.
For time unfolds according to its order.
But we get old a piece at a time.
A string of gray surrounds us.
A persistent stiffness,
A crumb of decay, a sudden splinter of pain.
Old age comes unevenly.
Rapping at us like a woodpecker.

Dr. Ben Michael Carter



Mike's library is available for viewing at 2505 W. Northgate Drive in Irving Texas.



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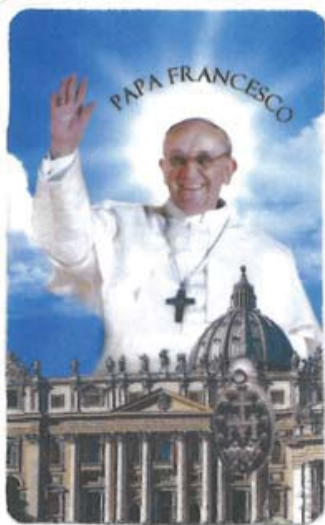
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From the Vatican, 19 September 2017

Dear Ms Carter,

I am writing to acknowledge the gift of inscribed copies of Dr Ben Michael Carter's writings, which you presented to His Holiness Pope Francis.

In expressing appreciation for this kind gesture, I am pleased to assure you of His Holiness's prayers for your late husband and for you and your intentions.

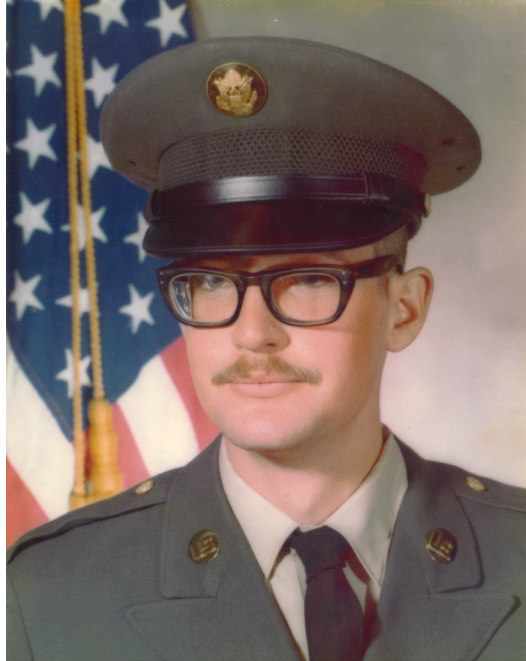


Yours sincerely,

Monsignor Paolo Borgia
Assessor

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Ben Michael “Mike” Carter was a Renaissance man who loved writing. He authored six theology books and a novel. He also wrote for magazines, journals and newspapers, as well as poetry reviews. He earned a B.A. in Economic History from the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, an MA in theological studies from Wheaton College, Illinois, an M.Th. from the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, U.K., and a Ph.D. in History of Christianity in the non-western world from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, United Kingdom. He was a member of the Irving chapter of the Texas Poetry Society, the American Scientific Affiliation, and the Evangelical Theological Society. He was married to Salma Carunia from Dohnavur Fellowship, Tirunelvel, South India.