The Old Testament

-- An Introduction and Theology

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# Introduction

Authorship and Composition

Old Testament scripture developed from many sources, over many centuries. Ancient oral traditions were later committed to writing, and then these documents went through a succession of compilations and editing, with final editing during the Babylonian exile (~ 550 BC) and the period of restoration under Persia (~ 450 BC). We acknowledge it as the word of God, because the entire composition, compilation and editing process (not just original authorship) was under the guidance and inspiration of the Spirit - *“inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness”* (2 Tim 3:16) [1].

Historical Timeline

1. Origins of humankind (in the image of God): ~ 50,000 years ago
2. The Great Flood: ~ 3,000 BC
3. Abraham: 2,000 BC
4. Exodus from Egypt: 1,200 BC
5. Saul and David: 1,000 BC
6. Babylonian Exile: 550 BC
7. Re-settlement under Persia: 450 BC

Organization

This lesson series will follow the organization of the Hebrew text [2]:

1. Torah (basic and foundational instruction --

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy 2-8

1. Former Prophets

(revelation in the historical interactions between YHWH and His people) –

Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings 9-14

1. Latter Prophets –
   * 1. Major: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel 15-18
     2. Minor: Hosea – Malachi 19-22
2. Writings (deeper understanding through reflection and meditation) –
   * 1. Poetic Books: Psalms, Proverbs, Job 23-26
     2. 5 Scrolls: Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther 27-31
     3. Apocalyptic: Daniel 32
     4. Historical: Ezra/Nehemiah, Chronicles 33-34

Styles and Genres

As with any literature, we must first try to imagine what it meant to the original audience, before we can discover it’s intended meaning for us. In this task, it is helpful to refer to other ancient writings and beliefs, and identify both the similarities and the differences. The OT writings use the conventions and styles of their times, assuming and accommodating the culture in which they lived, but delivering a theological message that is radically different from the man-made religions and values of the world. It is in those differences that we find the essential teachings.

Themes

There is One God, and He is good. This is a distinctive teaching, demanding faith in God’s character, and a hope that He shall fulfill His promises. His people desire to know Him, to see His glory, but such knowledge can only come through seeing and recognizing what God does and what He shall do. Full and certain knowledge of God, and His judgment and triumph over all the evils of the present age, must await the end of time. In that day, He will fully reveal His glory. Meanwhile, there are unresolved mysteries, and we walk by faith, with hope.

He is the necessary God (no other “god” has done, or can do, what He does), and He is the sufficient God (we need turn to no other “god” to supplement what He does) [3]. He is thus a “jealous” God. His sufficiency is further demonstrated by His power working in and through our own weakness. We are delivered not by our own strength or wisdom, but by His.

God’s name is YHWH, and the OT presents Him as:

1. Creator who establishes His purpose, preparing the foundation
2. Elector who chose Abraham and his descendants as agents of His purpose (redemption and new creation)
3. Lord of history who ensures that His purpose will be fulfilled
4. The Holy One: true to Himself, faithful to His promises and in His steadfast love

The Torah introduces the theme of alienation and reconciliation to God, which then continues as a thread through all scriptures. His presence is essential to life and blessing. But He is holy, and must be treated as holy, and his people are to be likewise holy. His presence and appearing therefore means life to the holy, but death to the unholy.

Election is for the sake of His reconciling mission, His plan for redemption, not for the sake of the elected. Also, those called for a special purpose are often not chosen for their special abilities or moral character; God simply chooses them for special service.

God works through his chosen people by means of covenant, consisting of:

1. God’s commitments, by grace, to fulfill promises of blessing.

2. The required human response of obedience and faith to receive these blessings

The Lord shows extraordinary patience and long-suffering yet with discipline and calls to repentance, and allowing His people to suffer the consequences of their sins [4].

The OT also presents YHWH as “humanized”, i.e. through anthropomorphisms. This should not be dismissed as simply “accommodating our weaknesses”, but rather be regarded in light of the Son of Man / Son of God, through whom are all things, and who has been from the beginning. Jesus said that He was before Abraham. YHWH is therefore to be identified with the glorified and pre-existing Christ, and hence, in many respects, partakes of human likeness.

Notes on Introduction

[1] The Spirit reveals the truth of God through all experiences, to those who have ears to hear: natural, general revelation in the creation; historical events; imaginative literature; arts. It is not only through specially called prophets that revelation takes place. Just as there is revelation throughout creation, there is revelation through all humanity. But it is not pure and infallible. The one who hears must have discernment, by the Spirit, to both apprehend truth and to reject error.

In accordance with this, inspired scripture arises from oral and written traditions from all kinds of sources, subsequently edited and compiled by people of God with critical spiritual discernment, and intended to be received and interpreted by those who have critical spiritual discernment.

All forms of revelation, except in Jesus, have been through imperfect media, accommodating a society's historical and scientific beliefs as well as their moral shortcomings. Accommodation in revelation is not only due to human finiteness and sinfulness, but also respect for humanity's self-determining autonomy. Just as God delegates to us the role of participating co-creators, He also assigns to us the role and privilege of seeking Him, the task of coming to know God. God permits error in revelation, in the same manner, and for the same reasons, that He permits bad behavior - sin and evil in the world. His exercise of sovereignty is light-handed, for the sake of creaturely autonomy and human freedom.

But, in spite of the flawed “messengers”, the necessary truths about God emerge. The processes of developing interpretations, developing traditions, and the editing and compiling of oral traditions and literature into scripture, are means of Spirit-guided purification: refining and distilling the genuine revelation of God out of it’s flawed and earthly origins. Prophets are subject to prophets (1 Corinthians 14:32), and to those who have the gift of discernment (1 Corinthians 12:10). This purifying work in revelation, by the Spirit, is analogous to all God’s works on earth. He works through a creation and through creatures who have many weaknesses and make many mistakes; but He still manages, through history, to accomplish His will; and He still manages, through the writings of men, to reveal truth about Himself. And, in the end, we can have confidence that this scripture is *“inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness”* (2 Timothy 3:16).

[2] See following references to “Law and Prophets”: Matthew 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Luke 16:16; 24:44.

[3] Consider the many texts that affirm there is no other god like Him (Exodus 15:11; Deuteronomy 3:24; 1 Samuel 2:2; 2 Samuel 22:32; Psalm 35:10; 71:19; 113:5; Isaiah 44:7; 45:5; Micah 7:18)

[4] See Exodus 34:6-7; Isaiah 55:6-9

# Genesis, Chapters 1-11

Genesis 1:1 asserts that God created all things, in the beginning, establishing Him as the one absolute sovereign God, with no predecessors, no viable contenders, and no necessary helpers. The state of being “formless and void”, in darkness, indicates the original chaos and emptiness from which God proceeded to establish order and fullness. He overcame chaos (see Psalm 74:12-17). Verses 3-31 present this creative work in a poetic form, with the enumerated “days” giving a thematic structure (not a chronological sequence) [1]:

1. He created light (overcoming darkness), by His commanding word.
2. He established the “firmament”, separating waters above from those below (order)
3. He confined the waters below, so that dry land appeared (order)
4. He populated the heavens with ruling lights (orderliness of day/night and of seasons)
5. He populated the sky with birds, and the seas with sea creatures (filling the emptiness)
6. He populated the dry earth with animals, and finally with mankind (filling the emptiness); He blessed all creatures, commissioning them to be fruitful and to multiply.

This presentation is remarkably similar to the preparation and consecration of a temple: God prepared the cosmos, particularly the earth, as a suitable habitation for His people, where He can be present with them. It also establishes the 7th day as a Sabbath (rest), when God enters this temple, to dwell with humankind. It sets the example for God’s people, for whom 6 days of labor find fulfillment in the Sabbath, dedicated to resting in God’s presence.

Psalm 33:1-12 presents God’s work of creation as evidence of His loving faithfulness, establishing a benevolent and life-sustaining order. This contrasts greatly with the Babylonian mythology, by presenting YHWH as absolutely sovereign, and in declaring that His creation is good, serving an altogether good purpose. The Babylonian supreme god, Marduk, obtained power as a warrior by defeating other gods, and the creation was a by-product of this warfare. Genesis asserts the absolute superiority of YHWH over Marduk, in both power and goodness.

Humanity (male and female) is created in the image of God, called to be His representative and agent, entrusted with the capacity, the authority and the commission to rule over creation (see Psalm 8:3-8). He gave humanity the ability to imagine the future, and to receive His vision for the future. This is in contrast to the Babylonian mythology, where human beings were created merely to do the wearisome labor that the gods did not want to do. Genesis 1 also teaches that all humanity, not just kings, bear the image of God.

In Genesis 2 & 3, the theme is the ideal, intended role of humanity, versus our present alienated state. God created man from the dust, breathed into him the breath of life, and he became a living soul [2]. Mankind was created to tend a garden, which is like an ornamental temple garden, indicating a priestly function: to establish order, and to rule with loving-kindness, in the image of God. But mankind falls for the temptation to over-reach, to become like God, by acquiring the “knowledge of good and evil”[3]. This can represent all kinds of “forbidden” knowledge, but the consequences suggest that it is especially the capacity for self-awareness, by which one becomes a law-maker and judge, of others as well as of oneself. Such knowledge is somewhat god-like, but it results in self-condemnation and shame. It is a knowledge that opens the way for sin, thus leading to death. This account assigns responsibility for mankind's troubles: they are not from the creator God, but from humanity seeking to become like God.

Genesis 1 – 3 presents a tension and conflict between:

1. Structured order and communion with God
2. Chaos, creative freedom, and self-determining autonomy

This same polarity is observed in society: authoritarian law and order vs. liberty, creativity and vitality. It is also reflected in two kinds of pagan deities: 1) heavenly gods who rule by law; 2) earth gods and goddesses who give life and fertility. YHWH is one God who embraces both, as the creator and sustainer of both life and of order [4]. He does not crush creative autonomy, but He rather tames it and redeems it.

Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-16): Cain illustrates how deviation from God's purpose invites disapproval, making a person vulnerable to sin. One must either master sin, or be mastered by sin. If the latter, he is to be outcast from God’s people, but protected from vengeance[5].

Genealogies (Genesis 5:1-32; 10:1-32; 11:10-31): These genealogies, from Adam to Noah, and from Shem to Abram, are similar to traditional genealogies of kings produced in ancient civilizations, such as the Sumerian King List. Their purpose was to establish the god-given authority of their kings. In Genesis, the genealogies establish the godly authority and mission of Abram and his descendants. They also convey the sense of solidarity of all humanity, reaching back to our common origin. It is the pedigree for God’s people, as a royal priesthood.

The Sons of God and Daughters of Men (Genesis 6:1-4): The interpretation of this is highly uncertain, but it may be that the “sons of God” are descendants of Adam, in the image of God, who were corrupted by marriage to peoples who did not know God. It parallels what happened to Israel in later times, when they were corrupted my intermarriage with the Canaanites.

The flood (Genesis 6:5-9:29): This narrative reveals the character of God: granting and upholding humanity’s freedom to sin, enduring their evils with extraordinary patience, yet with great regret. He finally destroys the evil, for the sake of a new beginning, so that the intended goodness of the creation can proceed. The post-flood covenant with Noah shows God’s irrevocable commitment to the creation, and to humankind (Gen 8:20-22; 9:8-17).

Babel (Genesis 11:1-9): The desire of man was to

1. Make a tower that reaches into heaven.
2. Make a name for themselves, so they would not be scattered

They sought a glorified kingdom that would have sole access to God, and be the basis for unifying all humankind. This centralized, exalted society would defy God’s command to populate the entire earth. The glory and destiny of mankind is not fulfilled in such man-made institutions, but by humbly carrying out the commission to fill the earth.

Genesis 1-11 introduces the recurring scriptural theme of divine judgment and rescue. God’s good work of creation is continually under assault from evil and chaos and rebellion; but He is absolutely sovereign, absolutely committed in His love, and we are to trust that He will prevail.

# Genesis, Chapters 12-50

This section of Genesis focuses primarily on the lives of three patriarchs: Abraham, Jacob and Joseph. They exemplify the basics of how God interacts with His chosen people.

Abram’s calling, and the promises

12:1-3 - Abram shall become a great nation, have a great name; “in you all nations shall be blessed”

13:14-16 - He shall have numerous descendants, who will receive the land

15:1-6 - Abram is concerned about an heir; God promises an heir “from your own body”

Abram’s faith was “reckoned as righteousness” - see Romans 4:1-3

15:8-21 -- A sacrifice establishes the covenant; giving the land to Abram’s descendants

16:1-16 -- Abram and Sarai become impatient, and take the initiative: Hagar bears Ishmael

17:1-8 -- God promises Abram will be a father of many nations; changes his name to Abraham; it is an everlasting covenant. God makes an extraordinary commitment.

17:9-14 -- God establishes circumcision as a sign of the covenant: a reminder that they are different, because of their calling

17:15-22 -- God promises that Sarah will bear a son; Abraham laughs

18:9-15 -- The son is promised within a year; Sarah laughs

Sodom and Gommorah - 18:16-33 – God consults Abraham, and they bargain

Birth of Isaac – 21:1-3 -- This miraculous birth shows the calling and mission are totally from God. It has the same significance as Jesus’ virgin birth.

Testing of Abraham – 22:1-14 - God asks him to sacrifice Isaac. This testing is transformative; not only for discovery, but more importantly as a confrontation that forces decision and self-determination, with the intended result of purification and transformation (Proverbs 25:22; 17:3; James 1:2-4)

Abram demonstrated that his devotion to God is no less than that of heathens to their false gods (e.g. Molech). But our God is different. He graciously provides a substitute. This establishes the standard for total commitment and sacrifice from God’s chosen – ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

Blessing and promises are repeated – 22:15-18

Jacob

25:21-26 -- birth of Jacob and Esau; the Lord declares the older will serve the younger.

25:27-34 -- Esau sells his birthright to Jacob

27:1-29 -- Jacob deceitfully obtains Isaac’s blessing (28,29)

27:41-46 -- Esau determines to kill Jacob; Rebekah warns Jacob and tells him to go to uncle Laban in Haran

28:10-15 -- On his journey, Jacob has a dream of a ladder to heaven: The Lord promises to be with him.

29:9-30 -- Jacob serves Laban7 years for Leah and 7 years for Rachel. He prospers.

31:1-3 -- Laban becomes “unfriendly”, and the Lord tells him to return to the promised land

32:1-12, 13-21 -- Jacob fears meeting Esau; he sends out presents to appease him

32:24-29 -- Jacob wrestles with an “angel” (the Lord). The Lord renames him “Israel”, because he prevailed. God condescends to struggle with us, rather than to overpower us. "Israel" means God prevails, as well as meaning that Jacob prevailed. They both won, in that Jacob finally yielded to the Lord, and he thereby obtained the blessing he sought. Compare the following:

Psalm 37:1-8 – “fret not”; "delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart"; “rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him”.

Psalm 46:10 - "cease striving and know that I am God";

Matthew 6:33-34 - "seek first His kingdom and righteousness..."

35:9-12 -- A renewed blessing and covenant with Israel.

Joseph

37:3-11 -- Joseph, the favorite son of Jacob, has dreams of becoming exalted over his brothers and parents, and unwisely talks about it.

37:18-28 -- The brothers have had enough, and sell him to Ishmaelites, who sell him in Egypt. They report to Jacob that he was killed by a wild beast.

39:1-6 -- Joseph serves Potiphar, and prospers

39:17-20 -- Potiphar’s wife falsely accuses him of assaulting her; Joseph is sent to jail

40:1-23 -- In jail, Joseph interprets dreams of Pharaoh’s baker and cupbearer

41:1-8 -- Pharaoh has two dreams, which no one can interpret

41:25-36 -- Joseph is summoned, and interprets the dreams: 7 years of plenty, to be followed by 7 years of famine. He advises Pharaoh on what must be done.

41:41 -- Pharaoh appoints Joseph over the land, to administer collecting grain prior to the famine, and to sell it back during the famine [6].

42:1-38 -- During the famine, Jacob’s sons go to Egypt to buy grain. Joseph (unrecognized) accuses them of being spies, and takes Simeon as hostage

43:1 – 44:13 -- Jacob’s sons have to return to Egypt to buy more grain, and they bring Benjamin (as Joseph had insisted they must do). Joseph instructs his servant to place his silver cup in Benjamin’s sack. When it is later discovered, they are arrested and brought back to Joseph.

44:14-34 -- Judah pleads with Joseph, and offers himself as a slave instead of Benjamin

45:3-8 -- Joseph relents, reveals himself, and they are reconciled. “God sent me before you to preserve life”. “It was not you who sent me here, but God”

45:24 – 47:28 -- They return home, and then bring Jacob and their families back to Egypt, to dwell in Goshen. God promises Jacob that his descendants will return, and become a great nation. (46:3-4)

49:1-27 -- Israel prophesies the destiny of the twelve tribes

50:20 -- Joseph reassures his brothers: “you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good … to preserve many people alive.” An example of providence; compare Romans 8:28

Themes:

1. Election: choosing a special people for a special mission
2. We are to live by faith (Abraham and Jacob)
3. We are tested, to build up and purify (Abraham and Joseph’s brothers)
4. In His promises, and covenants, God makes an everlasting commitment
5. By His providence, God ensures His will shall prevail, using evil to create good

Notes on Genesis

[1] Creation by the spoken word, "Let there be...", indicates a "calling", to evoke a response.

The role of the Spirit "hovering over the waters", like a wind blowing over the water, is to bring order out of chaos, by revealing God's purpose. He presents truth, confronts the creation with a vision of the future, liberating the creation from the tyranny of efficient cause, to freely create the future.

[2] The entirety of man’s being, his soul, is created, and the life we have is a gift from God. In contrast to Greek philosophy (Plato), man’s soul is not of itself immortal. We have life only so far as God gives and sustains life.

[3] For “knowledge of good and evil”, compare Deuteronomy 1:39, regarding the innocence of the children in the wilderness.

[4] For example, the gods of Babylon, ruled by the warrior-king Marduk, versus the Canaanite fertility gods: Baal and Ashtoreth. Consider also Wagner’s ring cycle, with the warrior god Wotan, and the fertility god, Freyr.

[5] This principle has universal applicability to all manner of temptation and sin. The inclination and desire is a deviation from God’s purpose, by which one is confronted by sin “crouching at the door”; if the person does not master sin, then he will be mastered by sin, and the sinful inclination will become sinful behavior. The behavior is then to be rejected by the community, and the person is to be socially outcast, excluded from fellowship, but not pursued for vengeance. This is consistent with the old covenant punishment of being cut off from God’s people (Exodus 31:14; Leviticus 7:27) and new covenant instructions for discipline within the church (Matthew 18:15-17; 2 Corinthians 5:1-13).

[6] Buy low, sell high.

# Exodus 1:1 - 15:21

Exodus shows God’s special intervention and providence extended beyond select individuals (patriarchs) to encompass an entire nation (their descendants). The God who is Creator is revealed also as the Redeemer who acts forcefully in history. He sees the affliction of the Israelites, hears their cries, and acts as the supreme and sovereign Lord to deliver them.

God’s intervention begins with ordinary means, through ordinary people: the midwives, Moses’ mother and sister, and Pharaoh’s daughter (Ex 1:17-21; 2:1-10).

Calling of Moses – Exodus 3:1 – 4:17

Ex 3:1-6 – YHWH speaks to Moses from a burning bush; this is holy ground (3:5); He reveals Himself as the God of the fathers (3:6).

Ex 3:7-9 – YHWH has come down to deliver them from Egypt, into the promised land. It may have been necessary to wait until oppression had reached this extremity, so that the people would be willing to leave.

Ex 3:10-12 – Moses asks: *“Who am I...”?* God’s answer: *“I will be with you”* (see Genesis 31:3). The sign of verification is: *“when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain”*. He must wait for this future event for proof that this word is indeed from God. Meanwhile, he must walk by faith, in hope.

Ex 3: 13-16 – Moses asks: *“What is your name?”.* God’s reply: *“I will be whom I will be”* – this is not a “name”, but a declaration. He then provides a name: *“****YHWH****, the God of your fathers,…”* This modifies an existing name of a deity, and assigns a new meaning to it, based on its similarity to the word for “become”. Compare 3:12 – *“I* ***will be*** *with you”*[1].

Ex 4:21-23 - Israel is YHWH’s firstborn son [2]. Traditional belief and practice was that the firstborn has special authority and responsibility for the future and destiny of one’s descendants. Israel is God’s firstborn, since they were selected for a special role to fulfill His purpose. Since Pharaoh will refuse to voluntarily release God’s firstborn, God will respond by taking Pharaoh’s firstborn by force.

Ex 5:1-2 -- Moses speaks to Pharaoh; but Pharaoh does not acknowledge YHWH.

Ex 6:1-9 - God was known to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as God Almighty, not as YHWH.

He remembers the covenant, and will redeem (vs. 6) His people to their rightful place.

The plagues – Exodus 7:1 – 10:29

The plagues were directed against the gods of Egypt, and against Pharaoh who was considered among the gods. For example, the 9th plague, darkness, was directed at the sun god, Re, the supposed father of Pharaoh. The 10th plague, death of the firstborn, was directed especially at Pharaoh himself. The plagues assert YHWH’s power and sovereignty against all the gods of Egypt. Such a demonstration of power will be the only way to convince Pharaoh.

Pharaoh’s heart is hardened. His will is crystallized, resisting any influence for change. As Moses repeatedly confronts him with YHWH’s demand, Pharaoh reveals and hardens his character, defining himself irreversibly.

It had to be shown that YHWH has power both to destroy and to deliver: i.e. to deliver, by defeating the enemy. To make a significant advance, it is often necessary to allow evil to develop to an extreme, so that it can be dramatically and thoroughly defeated, to make room for a radical new beginning. This has repeatedly happened in history, and Israel’s deliverance from Egypt was such an event.

The Passover – Exodus 11:1 – 12:51

Israel, as the firstborn, belongs to God; and the firstborn of each family rightly belongs to God. To force the Egyptians to acknowledge YHWH’s rights, He asserts His power by taking their firstborn. But He makes a distinction for the Israelites. They sacrificed the Passover lamb, and placed its blood on their doorposts and lintels. This purifies the entrance to the house, so that YHWH can be present to protect them from the angel of death. As with Abraham’s offering of Isaac, God provides a substitute. For both the Israelites and the Egyptians, YHWH asserts His rights and His sovereignty, and He shall be acknowledged by all.

Consecration of the firstborn - Exodus 13:11-16 – Since their firstborn had been protected from the 10th plague in Egypt, every firstborn henceforth shall be acknowledged as belonging to God, and must be redeemed.

Crossing the Red Sea -- Exodus 14:1 – 15:21. What appeared to be a confused wandering into a trap, with their backs against the Red Sea, was actually YHWH’s deliberate ploy to lure the Egyptians into a trap. YHWH could have lead Israel out of Egypt over land directly into Canaan, without confrontation with the Egyptians. But instead He chose to force a final confrontation, where the Egyptian army would be destroyed. This was to decisively and memorably demonstrate YHWH’s power to defeat Israel’s enemies, His power as a warrior against Pharaoh’s army. By this *“I will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord.”* (14:4, 17-18) Furthermore, the Israelites *“feared YHWH, and they believed…”* (14:31). This is celebrated in song in Exodus 15:1-18, 21:

*“Sing to YHWH, for He is highly exalted;*

*The horse and his rider He has hurled into the sea.”*

Summary

* The exodus of Israel from Egypt is a model and example of how God can act in history to deliver the oppressed, and YHWH will continue forever to be Israel’s deliverance whenever and wherever needed. [3]
* God revealed Himself as YHWH: the Redeemer, who fulfills His promises.

*“Who among the gods is like you, O YHWH?”* – Exodus 15:11

# Exodus 15:22 – 40:38

YHWH has delivered Israel, keeping His side of the covenant. He therefore now instructs Israel about their obligations, to be correspondingly faithful. These are the foundational instructions on how to live and how to worship, with justice and holiness, so as to honor YHWH and faithfully represent Him to the world. (Exodus 19:5-6)

Initial days in the wilderness - Ex 15:22 – 17:7

They grumble about water and food (waters of Marah (bitter); provision of Manna and quails).

At Massah and Meribah (17:1-7), water is obtained by striking a rock; but they are reprimanded for putting YHWH to the test (see Deuteronomy 6:16; Matthew 4:7) [4]

Battle with Amalek - Ex 17:8-15. Moses raising his hands is symbolic of spiritual openness and connection, in supplication to God, to praise/bless God, to confer blessing upon others.

YHWH is their banner/standard (vs. 15) – going before them in battle [5].

Receiving the Law, at Sinai - Ex 19:1 – 20:26

YHWH makes a conditional promise and commitment (vs. 5,6), and Israel accepts (vs. 8).

Consecration is required, emphasizing YHWH’s holiness and transcendence.

This covenant is in the same form as the Hittite “Suzerainty” treaty. Based on aid that had been delivered by an emperor (suzerain) to an inferior king (vassal), the vassal has obligations of obedience to the suzerain, with attached rewards for compliance, and punishments for non-compliance.

The Ten Words / Commandments (Ex 20:2-17):

*“I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”*

1. You shall have no other gods before Me

[in His presence, as a pantheon—no supplemental gods]

1. Do not make for yourself an idol

[idols are inadequate and insulting representations, intended to be manipulated]

1. You shall not take the name of YHWH your God in vain

[without due respect and seriousness; as in oaths or curses or incantations]

1. Remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy [relinquish control, stop striving, rest in the LORD]
2. Honor your father and mother

[parents represent YHWH’s authority, for the sake of the covenant]

1. You shall not murder
2. You shall not commit adultery

[to protect the family, as the foundational institution of the community]

1. You shall not steal
2. You shall not bear false witness
3. You shall not covet your neighbor’s possessions

[illicit desire, from the heart, leads to all other sins (James 1:14)] [6]

Ex 21:1 - 23:13 - Case laws; “if … then” clauses. These are provisions for a fair and just society, especially as compared to other nations of the time. They show a special concern to protect the poor and weak (e.g. widows, orphans, aliens).

Ex 23:14-17 – Three major feasts, which maintain community and connections with the past:

* 1. Unleavened Bread (Passover)
  2. Harvest (Weeks; Pentecost)
  3. Ingathering (Booths)

Ex 25:1 – 31:11 The tabernacle, its furnishings, and the priesthood.

It provides a holy place for YHWH (as the Sabbath is set apart as a holy time)

The ark of the covenant is a chest containing the tablets of the covenant. YHWH’s invisible throne is supported by the wings of the cherubim (1 Sam 4:4; Psalm 80:1). The ark serves as His footstool. The contact between YHWH and Israel is to be via the covenant, and mediated by a consecrated priesthood.

Ex 32:1 – 6 --The golden calf

Impatient for Moses’ return from the mountain, the people ask for an idol to represent YHWH, to lead them. This breaks the 2nd commandment, breaking the covenant. And they “rose up to play”, indicating a drunken orgy, characteristic of the worship of fertility gods (32:18-19).

Ex 32:7-14 -- YHWH’s anger, and Moses’ intercession; YHWH changes His mind.

Ex 32:21-29 -- Moses punishes them.

Ex 32:30-35 -- Moses intercedes again.

YHWH’s presence

Ex 33:1-6 - YHWH will no longer be present with them, but will send an angel instead.

Ex 33:12-17 -- Moses pleads for YHWH’s presence, and YHWH consents [7].

Ex 33:18-23 – Moses asks to see YHWH’s glory;

YHWH passes by to show his back, but will not reveal His face.

*“I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of YHWH before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion.”*

Ex 34:1-9 -- YHWH replaces the two tablets. He then proclaims:

*“YHWH, YHWH God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for the thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.” –* Exodus 34:6-7

Notes on Exodus

[1] God is not fully knowable, He is beyond our words or thoughts or imagination (Romans 11:33; 1 Corinthians 2:11). There will always be elements of mystery. What knowledge of God we can have is gradually attained through life experience. He progressively reveals Himself by His acts of faithfulness within each person’s life and throughout all history. Complete, perfect knowledge of Him is obtained only in the end. Meanwhile, we trust His promises, walking by faith (see 1 Corinthians 13:9-12). What is decisive for success is not our own knowledge or our own abilities, but God’s presence.

[2] This is analogous to the birthright of Isaac and of Jacob. The firstborn is dedicated to God, to belong to Him, to be holy. But God graciously provides a substitute sacrifice, so that His people can serve Him as a living possession, a living sacrifice (as in Romans 12:1).

[3] This is deliverance with a purpose: deliverance from evil powers (as requested at the end of the Lord’s prayer, Matthew 6:13), in order to serve YHWH (compare Romans 6 – 8). These duties that accompany freedom are the main subject of the remainder of Exodus.

[4] Jesus was similarly “put to the test” by those who would place demands upon Him as conditions for their support (Matthew 12:38-39; Luke 7:31-32; John 6:30-31).

[5] A “banner” is a rallying point for troops, that identifies and unifies the people. The Lord is the one who summons and unifies and leads His people, leading them to victory.

[6] The first four commandments pertain to our relationship with God, which is foundational. The fifth commandment, “Honor your father and mother”, involves relationships with both God and man, in that instructions from God are conveyed through the parents. The following four commandments pertain to our relationship with others, and the 10th commandment forbids coveting, which is the root of all kinds of evil.

[7] One of the important themes here and throughout the Old Testament is the need and desire for close communion with the LORD, versus the barrier due to the fact that He is holy, and His people are “unclean”: the fact that we are alienated, and in need of reconciliation. This corresponds to the tension between the immanence of God and His transcendence. The tabernacle and temple, and associated cult of priesthood and sacrifices, are types for the means of resolving this tension. The actual effectual means of reconciliation, the anti-type, is Jesus Christ. It is in Him that we can be reconciled to God, to experience His immanence in full fellowship.

# Leviticus

The theme of Leviticus is: *“You shall be holy because I, YHWH, am holy.”* - Lev 20:26 [1]. As representatives of the Lord, with a special calling to be His people, Israel must not dishonor Him by immorality or uncleanness. They must stand with Him, for justice and order [2,3]. See Col 1:22 *–“to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach"*.

Lev 1-3 -- Burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings

All meat-eating is a kind of substitutionary sacrifice: the animal is put to death, so that we can live. Making it a sacrifice to God acknowledges that He is the giver of all life, and the only One who has the right to take life. He is the One who gives and Who takes away.

The burnt offering is given totally to God, to maintain relationship with Him. It is a prayer of supplication for His favor, and expresses gratitude and reverence. It provides atonement (covering) for our general sinfulness, but is not related to any particular sins.

The peace offering is a celebration through a fellowship meal, in which the offeror eats meat from the sacrifice, in communion with God. (see also Leviticus 7:11-21)

Lev 4-6 -- Sin / guilt offerings:

These sacrifices are to restore a broken relationship with God, when a person has either sinned or has defiled what is sacred (cultic infractions). An animal, without defect, is first consecrated – given to God - by laying on of hands. Then God provides it to us for substitutionary sacrifice, for redemption [4].

1. The visceral fat is offered on the altar to God, belonging to Him only.
2. The blood, belonging to God, is used for purification and atonement (covering).
3. Portions of the meat are eaten by the priests in the sanctuary, as representatives of God, consuming the sins that had been imparted to the flesh.
4. The remainder of the carcass is to be burned outside the camp: it has acquired sinfulness; that which was holy has become unclean, and must be destroyed.

Lev 7-9 -- The Priesthood

Detailed instructions for sacrifices (Lev 7) and consecration of the priests (Lev 8).

Lev 10:1-20 -- Nadab and Abihu are struck down, for offering strange (unauthorized) fire: *“I will be treated as holy.”*

1. It was “profane” (i.e. ordinary) fire (coals), instead of coals obtained from the altar (Numbers 16:46).
2. God had not authorized them to approach His presence. (Leviticus 16:1-2,12-13)

It is likely that this carelessness was due to drunkenness (see Leviticus 10:8-11).

Lev 11-15 -- Clean and Unclean

These regulations have nothing to do with moral righteousness. They are rather for making distinctions between categories, establishing and defending boundaries, to maintain a ritual “cleanliness” that is necessary to properly represent God and to stand in His presence. They show respect for His holiness.

*“Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.”* – Lev 11:44 (1 Peter 1:14-16).

A general principle is that anything associated with death, disease or sexuality is inappropriate when approaching God in worship.

Lev 16 -- Day of Atonement

This is the day when all the sins of Israel are atoned for (i.e. covered), in order to renew the covenant relationship with YHWH, so they can continue as His people for another year. The blood is sprinkled on the altar and on the mercy seat, and the life in this blood “covers” their sins. The “scapegoat” then carries the sins away, into the wilderness (Psalm 103:12). YHWH is the One who makes the atonement, and this ritual dramatizes what God does. The people can thus be assured of forgiveness, and can have a renewed relationship with YHWH, with a cleansed conscience. The subjective barrier of guilt is removed, so that YHWH, in all His holiness, can continue to dwell among His people.

Lev 17:10-16 -- Significance of the blood -- *“For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement”* – Lev l7:11

Lev 18-20 -- Laws of Justice

These chapters repeat the ten commandments, and provide more specifics on sexual morality, and how to love your neighbor [5].

*“You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am YHWH.”* – Lev 19:17-18 (compare Ephesians 4:26 and Romans 12:17-21)

Lev 21-22 -- Laws of Holiness -- pertaining to the priesthood and sacrificial animals

Lev 23 -- The Three Festivals -- compare Exodus 23:14-17

Lev 24 – Other laws -- Sanctuary furnishings; proportionate justice (*an eye for an eye*)

Lev 25 -- Sabbatic Year and Jubilee -- to preserve the fertility of the land, and to ensure that each family can keep it’s inheritance throughout the generations.

Lev 26 -- Blessings and Curse

1. *“If you walk in My statutes…I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people.”*
2. *“But if you do not obey Me … I will punish you seven times for your sins…I will scatter (you) among the nations.”*
3. *“If they confess their iniquity … I will not reject them… I will remember the covenant … that I might be their God.”*

God is both transcendent and immanent – He is far above us, yet He wants to draw near. Leviticus provides instructions on how to draw near while showing due respect for His transcendent holiness. It shows how Israel can represent Him, and be His people, without profaning His name.

Notes on Leviticus

[1] The meaning of God’s holiness is that He is fundamentally different than the creation. He is wholly “other” and transcendent, and He is true (faithful) to himself. He is a God with integrity.

[2] Ritual and cultic regulations represent the establishment of order against chaos. Even though they have no moral significance in themselves, they are psychologically effectual for moral transformation. Furthermore, one who willfully rejects or despises such laws truly sins against God. These disciplines for holiness make us more receptive to God, more suited for relationship. Physical cleanliness and orderliness in all areas of life establish a context that leads us into moral purity and righteousness, aligning us with God in the struggle against chaos and evil.

This is the same principle as applied to military service: the disciplines of drills, cleanliness, orderliness and courtesies transfers into a discipline of obedience and an attitude of self-respect, pride of membership in the service and unit, and consequent acceptance of duty and responsibility. So ritual and formal liturgy in worship serves a similar purpose in our service to God.

The issues of holiness are not just objective status, but subjective self-assessment – the problem of a defiled conscience. Hence there is significant cultural relativism in making the distinctions of holy vs. unholy, clean vs. unclean, and in the means of purification. YHWH accommodates the existing attitudes and understandings of His people in these laws concerning holiness and purification. Consider Paul’s teachings about meat eating.

[3] Some of these laws of distinctiveness and ritual purity, which separate God’s people from other nations, are relevant only to the specific mission and cultural context of Israel (e.g. dietary). Many of them are “types”, pointing forward to their fulfillment in Christ. Other provisions, however, express principles that still apply to the new covenant; they arise from the Adamic covenant, the creation mandate and the universal intent that mankind serve as the "image of God". Examples of new covenant respect for His holiness pertain to speech (Ephesians 5:4), dress (1 Timothy 2:9), courtesies – especially during worship (1 Corinthians 14:40).

[4] The meaning of blood for atonement is that His life covers, or overcomes, the power of sin. The priests’ eating of meat on God’s behalf represents God as the one who takes on or bears the sins.

[5] The instructions of the Sinaitic covenant place great emphasis on community, present and future, relative to the individual. It indicates the importance of upholding institutions that will maintain a civil and just society well into the future. Such traditions and institutions establish the cultural environment for children, as a powerful component of teaching and training of future generations.

# Numbers

The book of Numbers presents the events during Israel’s sojourning in the wilderness. The main issues pertain to their lack of faith and their rebelliousness against the authority of Moses and Aaron, and the Lord affirming and establishing their authority.

Numbers 1 – 3 -- Census and military organization of the tribes, and duties of Levites

Numbers 5 -- Regarding cleansing for leprosy and discharges, confession and restitution for sins, and a test for adultery.

Aaron’s benediction (Numbers 6:24-26):

*“The Lord bless you, and keep you; the Lord make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance on you, and give you peace.”*

Numbers 7 – Offerings from the leaders

Numbers 8 -- Cleansing the Levites; Israel’s firstborn

Numbers 9 -- First observance of the Passover

Numbers 10 -- They leave Sinai

Numbers 11 -- Complaint about manna; they want meat. Quail are provided, and a plague ensues.

Numbers 12 -- Miriam and Aaron rebel against Moses. The Lord confirms Moses’ authority

Numbers 13-14 -- Spies sent out to investigate the promised land.

Two (Caleb and Joshua) give a favorable report: *“we should by all means go up and take possession of it”*. Other ten advise against it: “*We are not able to go up against the people, for they are too strong for us*…*It is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great size…we became like grasshoppers in our own sight”*. The people rebel and listen to the unfavorable report from the ten spies.

YHWH again says He will destroy the people with pestilence, and start over with Moses. But Moses again intercedes, and persuades YHWH to pardon them, appealing to YHWH’s character (Numbers 14:18). But the people will have to remain in the wilderness another 40 years; none of the adults except Caleb and Joshua will survive to enter the land.

Numbers 15:1-31 – Burnt offerings and sin offerings (for unintentional sins).

Those who sin intentionally (defiantly) shall be cut off from among the people (15:30-31). A person who thus blasphemes the Lord, despising the word of the Lord, bears his own guilt [1].

Numbers 16 -- Korah rebels against Moses and Aaron, desiring priestly authority. YHWH destroys Korah and his household, thus reaffirming Aaron in the priesthood. The people then grumble against Moses and Aaron for this punishment, and YHWH responds by sending a plague among them. Aaron then offered incense to make atonement, thus stopping the spread of the plague (16:46-48).

Numbers 17 -- After this, YHWH asks for the leader of each tribe to present an almond rod, and the 12 rods were deposited before the Lord in the tabernacle. On the next day, Aaron’s rod sprouted and put forth buds and blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds. This proved that Aaron and his household were indeed chosen by YHWH for the priesthood [2].

Numbers 18 -- Specifies particular duties of the Levites.

Numbers 19 -- Ordinance of the Red Heifer: it’s ashes to be used to sanctify purification water for ritual cleansings.

Numbers 20:8-13 -- Moses failed to believe God and treat Him as holy. When YHWH tells Moses to speak to the rock so it will provide water, Moses spoke to the people: *“You rebels, must we fetch you water out of this rock?”* Moses was acting from anger, not from compassion; begrudgingly, not willingly. The disbelief was not in regard to God’s power, but regarding His mercy. In this way he failed to represent God’s holiness. – Deut. 32:51; Psalm 106:32-33

Numbers 21:6-9 -- The bronze serpent. The Lord sent “fiery serpents” among the people. Moses intercedes to stop the plague by making a bronze serpent on a standard. When anyone bit by one of the serpents looked up to the bronze serpent, he lived. See John 3:14,15, for comparison to looking to the uplifted Christ for salvation.

Numbers 22 – 24 -- Baalam. Balak, king of Moab, hires Baalam to prophesy against Israel. Balaam protests that he cannot say anything contrary to what YHWH tells him, but finally agrees anyway to go and proclaim a prophecy regarding Israel. YHWH allows this, but His angel, expressing YHWH’s true will, tries to obstruct him. Three times, Baalam prophecies; and each time he is compelled by YHWH to proclaim a blessing upon Israel. YHWH’s determination to be faithful to the covenant, to bless Israel, is expressed in 23:19 -- *“God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has he said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?”*

Even though Baalam was a prophet, speaking the word of God, His heart was not in it. He was hoping to find a way to compromise, in order to obtain payment that Balak had offered. (see Numbers 31:16; Revelation 2:14)

Numbers 25 -- Israel sins by worshipping Baal, and in associated harlotry. As punishment, YHWH sends a plague. Phinehas, grandson of Aaron, turns away YHWH’s wrath, stopping the plague, by killing the offenders.

Numbers 28-29 -- Laws for offerings.

Numbers 30 -- Vows

Numbers 31 -- Vengeance against Midian, for causing Israel to serve Baal (31:16)

Numbers 32 -- Reuben, Gad and Manasseh settle East of the Jordan.

Numbers 33:50 – 35:34 -- Instructions for occupying the land:

*“if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land,…those whom you let remain will become as pricks in your eyes and as thorns in your sides, and they will trouble you.”*

These examples of rebellion and disobedience (Miriam and Aaron against Moses, the 10 spies, Korah, Moses striking the rock, Baalam, and those who worshipped Baal) serve as warnings: to obey the covenant, to obey His designated leaders, and for the leaders to give honor to God.

Notes on Numbers

[1] This is equivalent to the intentional rebelliousness described in Hebrews 6:1-8; 10:26-31. Willful rejection of the Lord cuts a person off from the community of His chosen people, and he therefore no longer has a share in the sacrifices offered by and for that community.

[2] This is another example of the recurring theme that it is God, and Him only, who chooses and appoints His agents and representatives (priests and leaders). These offices are not to be self-appointed. It is the same principle as when He bypassed the firstborn to select Jacob over Esau, Joseph over Reuben, and Ephraim over Manasseh.

# Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy is a second statement of the covenant, delivered essentially as a sermon, where Moses urges the generation that came of age in the wilderness, those who would enter the promised land, to make their own commitment to the covenant. Deuteronomy emphasizes the supreme authority of Torah (the written word).

Review of events in the wilderness -- Deuteronomy 1- 3

Defeat of Amorites (Sihon and Og). Their land was given to Reuben, Gad, Manasseh.

To properly understand the present, one must know and remember the past.

The Law, and instructions for conquest

4:2, 6-8 -- Do not add or take away from this Law; it is a testimony to the nations of YHWH’s wisdom

5:6-21 -- Repetition of the 10 commandments

6:4-5 – Shema: *"Hear, O Israel! YHWH is our God, YHWH is one! You shall love YHWH your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might"*

6:7 -- Teach the commandments to your sons. (also Deuteronomy 11:18-20)

Deut 7-8 -- Warnings and promises

*“Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.”* - Deuteronomy 8:3

Recounting events after giving the law

Deut 9 -- The Lord will go before them to drive the Canaanites out of the land. But Israel is to remember that they are a stubborn people, who had repeatedly provoked the Lord.

Deut 9:5 -- *“It is not for your righteousness or for the uprightness of your heart that you are going to possess their land, but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord you God is driving them out before you, in order to confirm the oath which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”*

Deut 10 -- more exhortation

10:12 -- *“What does the Lord your God require from you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the Lord you God with all your heart and with all your soul”*

10:16 -- *“So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer.”*

Deut 11 -- Blessings of obedience

11:18 -- *“Impress these words of mine on your heart and on your soul.”*

Further elaboration of the law

Deut 12 -- Laws of the sanctuary – there shall be one central place for offerings and sacrifices. This is a discipline to unify Israel, and to discourage idolatry.

Deut 13:1-4 -- Do not follow false prophets, regardless of signs and wonders. Follow YHWH, and keep His commandments. Discern true and false prophets according to the Torah (written word).

Deut 14 -- Clean and unclean animals; tithing

Deut 15: -- Sabbatic year – for releasing slaves, for debt forgiveness, for the land

Deut 16:1-17 -- Feasts

Deut 16:18 – 17:13 -- Administration of justice: no favoritism; bribes are forbidden

Deut 17:14-20 -- Regulations for the king – do not accumulate excessive wealth, or too many wives; the king is subordinate to the Torah

Deut 18:1-14 -- Portions for the Levites; forbidding spiritism, sorcery, divination.

Deut 18:15-18 -- *"YHWH your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you... You shall listen to him."*

Deut 19:1-13 -- Cities of refuge – to protect those who have killed someone accidentally: making a distinction between intentional and unintentional killing.

Deut 20 – 26 -- Regulations for warfare; various laws; first fruits

Curses and blessings: Deuteronomy 27 – 28

The covenant presents a balance between the following two teachings [1]:

1. YHWH’s promises and commitment are unconditional
   1. He is faithful and steadfast in His love
   2. Resulting blessings are guaranteed corporately (i.e. for Israel as a whole, at the end of the age)
2. YHWH’s blessings are contingent for individuals
   1. Requires personal obedience and faithfulness
   2. Requires the individual to truly belong to Israel (in fellowship with His people)

Renewing the Covenant

Deut 29 -30 -- Covenant for the new generation; prophecy of repentance and restoration

Deut 29:29 -- *"The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us, and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.”* [2]

Deut 30:11-14 -- *"This commandment which I command you today is not too difficult, nor is it out of reach.... The word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it."*

There is no excuse for disobedience: the commands are readily understandable, and within their ability to perform.

Deut 30:19 -- *"I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants."* (11:26-28)

Final counsel and blessings -- Deuteronomy 31 – 33

Deut 31:6 -- *“Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them, for the Lord your God is the one who goes with you. He will not fail you or forsake you.”*

Summary theme of Deuteronomy:

Deut 32:46-47 -- *"Take to your heart all the words with which I am warning you today, which you shall command your sons to observe.... For it is not an idle word for you; indeed it is your life."*

Notes on Deuteronomy

[1] There is a tension between:

1. Unconditional promises / commitment / faithfulness from YHWH

Nothing can separate us from His love

He will never forsake us

Blessing guaranteed corporately (over all generations)

There will always be a remnant

2. Requirement for obedience / commitment / faithfulness from His people

Blessings are individually contingent (requiring willing fellowship to participate)

Excludes those who have been “cut off” due to willful sin

[2] Accept the limitations of human wisdom and comprehension. What is revealed is adequate for us to “walk by faith”.

# Joshua

Joshua is a bridge between Torah and all subsequent scripture. As the first book of the “Former Prophets”, it presents history from a Godly perspective. This book shows Torah's relevance and how it is to be applied. This was a high point in Israel's history, in that it was a time of obedience to YHWH and consequent success and blessing. This generation of Israel was exceptionally well prepared, having been instructed by Moses, as described in Deuteronomy. Furthermore, they accepted Joshua's leadership, as one who had been duly authorized, who was rigorously faithful and obedient to the word, and was consequently successful in his mission.

Joshua’s name (see Numbers 13:16) -- Moses changed his name from O'Shea (he saves) to Jehoshua (YHWH saves).

Joshua 1 - 12 – Conquest of Canaan, breaking the strongholds

YHWH speaks to Joshua: *“Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.”* -- Josh 1:7-8.

Joshua 2 -- Two spies are sent into Jericho, who are sheltered and protected by Rahab. She is consequently spared and rewarded. The scarlet cord to be hung from her window would protect her when the invasion takes place (Josh 2:12-21). It is similar to the Passover blood on doorpost and lintel.

Afterwards, Rahab married Salmon, son of Nahshon (head of the tribe of Judah, Num 7:12), and their son was Boaz, great-grandfather of David (Ruth 4:20-22; Matthew 1:4-6). See also Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:21,25, where she is honored as an example of faith and faithfulness. Rahab was elevated to a position of the highest honor and blessing, in the genealogy of David, and ultimately of the Christ.

Joshua 3 -- Crossing the Jordan: YHWH speaks to Joshua: *“This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you.”* – Joshua 3:7. When the priests carrying the ark of the covenant stepped into the Jordan, YHWH stopped the flow of the river, so they could cross on dry ground (Josh 3:14-17). This demonstrates YHWH's presence and power, and authenticates Joshua as their leader.

Joshua 4 -- Stone memorials were set up in the Jordan, and at Gilgal, so that future generations would remember this event, and *“all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, so that you may fear the Lord your God forever.”* -- Joshua 4:24.

Joshua 5 -- The Israelites were then circumcised, so they could observe the Passover. Israel had to be in full partnership with YHWH, faithful to the covenant, before proceeding to take possession of the land. This illustrates the importance of symbolic acts as signs of commitment. Failure to abide by the designated signs would amount to a failure to commit.

Joshua 6 -- Battle of Jericho

The overall military strategy was:

1. Take Jericho and Ai, to gain access to the high country

2. Take the high country, to control highways

3. Drive a wedge Westward through the center of the land, then fan out South and North

Jericho, as the beginning of conquest, was taken miraculously, as a sign, to establish faith. The city was completely encircled by the army of Israel. They marched around it once for each of 6 days, and on the 7th day they marched around it 7 times. They then shouted, the walls came down, and the army of Israel rushed in and took the city [1].

Jericho was “devoted” to YHWH, meaning no one was to be spared, and no spoil was to be taken. It was regarded as “firstfruits”, totally dedicated to YHWH.

Joshua 7-8 Battle for Ai. The city of Ai, and subsequent cities, were to be defeated by "ordinary" means, but still with YHWH's indispensable help. The initial assault of Ai resulted in defeat, because Achan had sinned by taking spoils from Jericho, violating the ban. This illustrates the corporate consequences of an individual's deeds. The whole community suffered from the sins of an individual. After Achan had been identified and executed, the army was then able to conquer the city. Joshua then built an altar at Mt. Ebal, assembled all the people on Ebal and Gerrizim, and read the blessings and the curses as had been directed in Deuteronomy 27-28 (Joshua 8:30-35).

Joshua 9 -- The Gibeonites deceive Israel, and they make a treaty

Joshua 10 – 12 -- Conquest of the rest of the land.

Joshua 13 - 24 -- Dividing the land, so that each tribe and family could "take possession" [2]

Josh 13 – 19 -- Detailed partitioning of land to the tribes

Josh 14 -- Caleb takes possession of his allotment and the city of Hebron

Not all the Canaanites were driven out or subdued (Josh 16:10; 17:12-13, 16-18; Judges 1:27-36)

Josh 20 -- Cities of refuge identified and established – to administer justice in distinguishing intentional murder from unintentional man-slaughter.

Josh 21 -- Cities assigned for Levites

Josh 22 -- Dispute and resolution regarding an altar built by the 2 1/2 tribes [3]

The final charge: *“Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the river, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”* Josh 24:15.

Notes on Joshua

[1] The seven days of marching, and circling seven times on the seventh day, invokes the symbolic meaning of seven: the completeness and perfection of God’s works. Compare the seven seals and seven trumpets in Revelation 6 and 8-9.

[2] The land is a gift from YHWH; and like all gifts, it is not just a blessing, but a blessing with responsibilities. It is primarily a resource that enables them to perform their mission, and hence to attain fulfillment. The ultimate blessing is in that fulfillment of mission. It entails responsibilities and expectations of performance.

Similarly, the concept of “rest” does not pertain to idleness, but it rather indicates the end of the preparatory phase of mission and the beginning of the execution phase. All the needed resources are available and ready for use. See Hebrews 4:1-11.

[3] This example of dispute resolution is consistent with the teaching of Matthew 18:15 for handling disputes within the church.

# Judges

The book of Judges covers the events between the death of Joshua and the birth of Samuel, about 1200 – 1070 BC. The word translated as “judge” encompasses the role of “deliverer” or “savior”. It was a period of repeated cycles of 1) falling away (apostasy); 2) servitude and oppression; 3) supplication and repentance; and 4) deliverance by a “judge”. In each of these cycles, they departed further and further from the covenant, descending into the idolatry and immorality of the Canaanites that remained in the land.

Judges 1 -- Judah and Simeon take possession of their portion of land; Caleb takes Hebron; and the “sons of Joseph” (i.e. Manasseh and Ephraim) take Bethel. It is noted, however, that inhabitants of the valleys were not driven out (Judges 1:19, 27-36).

Judges 2:1-3:8 -- Due to their disobedience, the Lord says:

*“I will not drive them out before you; but they will become as thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you.”* – Judges 2:3.

The cycle of disobedience, oppression, repentance and deliverance is described in Judges 2:11-19. *“They forsook the Lord and served Baal and the Ashtaroth.”* - 2:13

Because of their persistent disobedience, the Lord says He will no longer drive out the native inhabitants, but would allow them to remain, “*in order to test Israel by them*.” – Judges 2:22; 3:1-8. They were “tested” in that they were compelled to choose whom they would serve, and to suffer the consequences. The ultimate result of such testing was that a remnant of the nation would eventually be purified.

Judges 3:9-31 - The first three judges were Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar.

Deborah

Judges 4 – Deborah judges Israel; Barak leads the Israelite army, to defeat Sisera’s army of Canaanites. Jael kills Sisera with a tent peg (4:18-21).

Judges 5 -- The Song of Deborah celebrates this victory.

Gideon

Judges 6 – Israel is oppressed by Midian, and Gideon is called by the Lord to deliver them (6:11-24). The angel addresses him as “O valiant warrior”, seeing him according to his potential, rather than according to past and present. In response to the Lord’s direction, Gideon destroys the altar to Baal (6:25-32). Gideon then obtains verification of His calling by the fleece test (6:36-40).

Judges 7 -- Gideon raises an army of 32,000, which the Lord directs him to reduce to only 300 (6:1-8). With his 300 men, they frighten the Midianites, and they flee (6:15-23).

Judges 8:4-21 -- Gideon then chases and defeats the Midianite army and executes their kings, Zebah and Zalmunna.

Judges 8:22-27 -- Gideon is offered kingship, but refuses. He makes a golden ephod, which Israel then worshipped as an idol.

Judges 9 -- Gideon’s son, Abimelech, accepts kingship, but is then killed in a rebellion.

Judges 10 -- Israel was oppressed by the Philistines and Ammonites. They were then delivered by two judges: Tolah and Jair.

Judges 11 -- Jephthah is appointed as judge, and delivers them from Ammon. To fulfill a vow, he then sacrificed his daughter (11:29-40)

Judges 12 -- Jephthah is succeeded by three judges: Ibzan, Elon and Abdon.

Samson

Judges 13 – Israel is oppressed by the Philistines. Manoah, who had been barren, gives birth to Samson, who is dedicated to the Lord as a Nazirite (Numbers 6:2-5).

Judges 14 -- Samson marries a Philistine woman, and proposes a riddle to the Philistines at the marriage feast. When they find out the riddle, Samson kills 30 Philistines to pay off the wager.

Judges 15 -- Samson burns the Philistine wheat crops, by releasing foxes with torches tied to their tails. He is then bound by ropes and handed over to the Philistines; but he breaks the ropes and slays 1,000 Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey.

Judges 16 -- Samson then takes up with Delilah, who betrays him by cutting his hair, and handing him over to the Philistines. The Philistines then blind him, and force him to serve as a grinder in prison. When he is then brought out for display at a celebration in the temple of Dagon, he prays for restored strength, that he may be avenged. He then pushed against the pillars of the temple, so that the temple collapsed, and he and all the Philistines present were killed. (16:28-31)

Judges 17 -- Micah sets up a shrine in Ephraim with a silver graven image, and recruits a Levite to serve as “priest” for the shrine.

Judges 18 -- Danites pass through, while migrating to a new territory. They take the idol and the Levite, and set up the idolatrous shrine in their new city of Dan (18:27-31).

Judges 19 -- A Levite’s concubine is raped and killed while they were staying over night in Gibeah (19:15-28). It is of interest that they had decided not to stay in the foreign city of Jebus because they thought it would be safer in the Israelite city of Gibeah (2:11-12). This event was later regarded as an example of the deepest depravity (Hosea 9:9). He then cut her body into 12 pieces, and sent the pieces out to the 12 tribes, to raise an army to seek vengeance against Gibeah (of Benjamin).

Judges 20 -- Civil war ensued, with the army of the 11 tribes against Benjamin. Benjamin is defeated, and only 600 of their men survive.

Judges 21 -- So that the tribe could have descendants and not be eliminated, arrangements were made for a feast in Shiloh, and the surviving Benjamites were allowed to capture the daughters of Shiloh, while they were dancing, and take them away to be their wives (21:23).

The book of Judges presents some positive examples of strength and courage, but the dominant message is a warning against apostasy.

*“In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”* – Judges 21:25

# 1st Samuel

1 Samuel covers the time from the birth of Samuel until the death of Saul: a period of recovery from the depravity of the Judges, and the establishment of monarchy.

1 Samuel 1:1-2:11 -- Hannah prays for a son, and vows to dedicate him as a Nazirite (1:10-11). The priest, Eli, hears her request, and blesses her. She gives birth to Samuel, and fulfills her vow by bringing him to Eli to be dedicated to the Lord’s service. This is followed by her song of thanksgiving (2:1-10), exalting the Lord as the One who humbles the proud and exalts the humble: a continuing theme of scripture (e.g. Psalm 75 and Mary’s song in Luke 1:46-55). Hannah’s faith and obedience were rewarded, not only with a son, but with a son shaped by her example. The remarkable recovery of Israel, culminating in the anointing of David to be king, is traceable to her humble prayer of desperate faith.

1 Samuel 2:12-3:21 – Eli’s sons despise the Lord, in their priestly duties, and will be rejected. Samuel receives a calling from the Lord, to serve as a prophet and a priest in their stead.

1 Samuel 4 – In a battle with the Philistines, Eli’s sons are killed, and the ark of the covenant is taken. Eli dies when he hears the news.

1 Samuel 5-6 – The Philistines are cursed with a plague, and they therefore return the ark.

1 Samuel 7 -- Samuel calls the people to repentance, and gathers them together for prayer, that they might be delivered from the Philistines. When the Philistines assembled their forces to attack, the Lord thunders, and confuses them. As a result, Israel was able to drive them out of their land. Samuel placed a memorial stone, called “Ebenezer” (stone of help), to commemorate this victory (7:12-14).

1 Samuel 8-10 -- The people demand a king, as successor to Samuel, noting that Samuel’s sons “do not walk in your ways”. Samuel says that their desire for a king is a rejection of YHWH as king, and he warns the people about what it means to have a king, but they accept the consequences. Samuel is then led to Saul, and anoints him to be their king.

1 Samuel 11 -- The people of Jabesh are oppressed by the Ammonites, and send messengers throughout Israel asking for deliverance. Saul responds by raising an army, and they defeat the Ammonites. As a result, all the people accept him as their king.

1 Samuel 12 -- Samuel speaks to the people, again demanding that they repent of idolatry, and criticizing them for requesting a king (12:12-13). He exhorts them to *“fear the Lord, and serve Him in truth with all your heart”* (12:24-25).

1 Samuel 13 -- Jonathan, Saul’s son, attacks a Philistine garrison, provoking them to assemble their forces against Israel. Saul and his men had been instructed to wait at Gilgal for Samuel to arrive, to offer sacrifices, before engaging in battle. When Samuel did not show up on time, Saul took it upon himself to offer the sacrifices. Samuel then arrives, and reprimands Saul for not keeping the Lord’s command. Because of this, Saul’s kingdom will not endure (13:13-14). Saul was unwilling to “wait upon the Lord”.

1 Samuel 14 -- Saul’s army defeats and pursues the Philistines on this occasion, but the warfare continues throughout Saul’s reign (14:52).

1 Samuel 15 -- After defeating the Amalekites, Saul again disobeys, by not totally dedicating the lives and the spoils to the Lord (15:9), and particularly for sparing some of the sheep for sacrifices. Samuel announces that the Lord has therefore rejected him from being king. *“To obey is better than sacrifice”* (15:22).

1 Samuel 16 -- David is chosen by Samuel to be the next king, on the basis of what God sees in the heart, rather than outward appearance (16:7). He was “after the Lord’s own heart” (13:14), i.e. sharing the values and the purposes of the Lord.

1 Samuel 17 -- When Goliath challenges Israel on behalf of the Philistines, David accepts the challenge, and slays him. This demonstrates his deep faith, built upon experiences of habitually trusting the Lord, and being delivered.

1 Samuel 18 -- Saul then appoints David to command his forces in the battles against the Philistines. However, when the people praise his successes, Saul becomes jealous, and begins to mistrust him.

1 Samuel 19-22 -- Saul orders that David be put to death, and David flees. Jonathan tries to intercede, but is unsuccessful. David, on the run, finds refuge in the Philistine city of Gath, then a cave of Adullam, gathering a force of 400 followers, then on to Moab, and to Judah.

1 Samuel 23-24 -- David and his men flee into the wilderness hill country. On one occasion, David discovers Saul in a cave, and secretly cuts off a piece of Saul’s robe. He tells Saul that he had spared him, saying “*I will not stretch out my hand against my lord, for he is the Lord’s anointed”* (24:10). Saul concedes that David is righteous, and that David shall become king (24:17-22). They then go their separate ways.

1 Samuel 25 -- In a dispute between David and Nabal, Abigail, Nabal’s wife, makes peace by bringing gifts to David. Shortly after, Nabal dies, and David marries Abigail.

1 Samuel 26 -- David again has an opportunity to slay Saul, but spares him: *“who can stretch out his hand against the Lord’s anointed and be without guilt?”* (26:8-11)

1 Samuel 27 -- David again finds refuge among the Philistines, claiming that he is now fighting against Israel, when he is actually fighting Canaanites and Amalekites.

The events of 1 Samuel 19-24, regarding YHWH’s protection of David while he is pursued by Saul, are the background of several of the Psalms: 34, 54, 56, 57, 59, 63, 142.

1 Samuel 28 -- The Philistines gather for war, and Saul seeks counsel from a medium, who calls up Samuel from the dead. Samuel tells him he will be defeated and that *“the Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hand and given it to you neighbor, to David.”* (28:17-19).

1 Samuel 29-30 -- David and his men engage and defeat a band of Amalekites.

1 Samuel 31 -- The Philistines attack and defeat Saul’s army, at Mt. Gilboa, and kill Saul’s sons. When Saul saw that he was defeated, he fell on his own sword, rather than be captured by the Philistines.

This book gives the background to understand the monarchy. In seeking a king, they rejected YHWH as king; in seeking to be like the other nations, they forsake their calling to be different. The only acceptable king would be one “after the Lord’s own heart”.

# 2nd Samuel

2 Samuel covers the reign of David as king. David had previously been tested by adversity, proving himself as a man after God’s own heart. In 2nd Samuel, we seem him subjected to the more demanding tests that accompany success and empowerment.

2 Samuel 1 -- David slays the Amalekite who had killed Saul, “the Lord’s anointed”. He laments: “How the mighty have fallen!”

2 Samuel 2 -- David and his men go to Hebron, and the people of Judah anoint him as their king. Abner, the commander of Saul’s army, makes Ish-bosheth, son of Saul, the king over Israel (10 tribes). There ensues a battle between Abner (Israel) and Joab (Judah), where Israel loses and retreats.

2 Samuel 3 -- The civil war continues, and David has 6 sons, from 6 wives: Amnon, Chileab, Absalom, Adonijah, Shephatiah and Ithream. Abner defects to David, but is then murdered by Joab.

2 Samuel 4 -- Two of Saul’s commanders murder Ish-bosheth, and bring his head to David, who then has them killed.

2 Samuel 5 – Israel comes over to David, and anoints him as king. David captures Jerusalem, making it his capital city. Two major battles are waged against the Philistines.

2 Samuel 6 -- The ark of the covenant is then moved to Jerusalem. In the process, Uzzah reaches out and takes hold of the ark to keep it from falling over. The Lord struck him down for his irreverence, and he died (see 1 Chronicles 13 and 15 for further explanation).

2 Samuel 7 -- David wants to build a temple in Jerusalem, for the ark, but the Lord, through the prophet Nathan, says he shall not. It was because David was a man of war, and had shed much blood (1 Chron. 22:7-8). But he will have a son that shall build a temple, and the Lord promises: *“Your house and your kingdom shall endure before me forever; your throne shall be established forever.”* - 2 Samuel 7:16. This is the foundational prophecy for the Messianic theme that will become increasingly prominent in subsequent scripture.

2 Samuel 8 -- Battles are waged, and David defeats the Philistines, Moab, Zoba, the Arameans, and Edom.

2 Samuel 9 -- David provides for Mephibosheth, the crippled son of Jonathan.

2 Samuel 10 – Joab leads the army to defeat the Arameans and Ammonites.

2 Samuel 11 -- David commits adultery with Bathsheba, Uriah’s wife, and she becomes pregnant. In an attempted cover-up, David summons Uriah from the battle field, in the hopes that he will visit his wife, but Uriah refuses to spend the night at home. David therefore sends a message to Joab to arrange for Uriah’s death in battle. After Uriah is killed, David marries Bathsheba.

2 Samuel 12 -- The prophet Nathan then comes to David and tells him a story of a rich man who steals his poor neighbor’s lamb. David answers that this man deserves to die, and must make restitution fourfold. Nathan replies: *“You are the man!”.* For his sins of adultery and murder, “*the sword shall never depart from your house… I will raise up evil against you from your own household”* (12:10-11). The Lord then strikes the child that is born by Bathsheba, and he dies: *“because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme”* (12:14). Bathsheba then has another son, Solomon. Psalm 51 is David’s prayer of confession and repentance for these sins.

2 Samuel 13-14 -- David’s oldest son, Amnon, rapes his half-sister. In revenge, Absalom murders Amnon, and then flees to Geshar, for three years. David then allows him to return to Jerusalem.

2 Samuel 15-17 -- Absalom recruits followers over the next several years, and then departs to Hebron, raises an army and attacks Jerusalem. David and his men flee into the wilderness, and Absalom captures the city.

2 Samuel 18-19 -- Absalom’s army pursues David, and a battle is waged in the forests of Ephraim. David’s men win the battle, and Joab kills Absalom. David then returns to Jerusalem and is restored as king of Judah.

2 Samuel 20 -- Sheba leads Israel in a revolt against David. Joab, commanding the army of Judah, pursues Sheba. Sheba takes refuge in the city of Abel Beth-maacah, and Joab besieges the city. A woman of the city persuades the people to execute Sheba, and they throw Sheba’s head over the wall, thus ending the siege, and the revolt.

2 Samuel 21 -- Vengeance is executed against Saul’s sons, on behalf of the Gibeonites. More battles were waged against the Philistines.

2 Samuel 22-23 -- Songs of David, praising the Lord for deliverance (repeated in Psalm 18).

2 Samuel 24 -- David was incited to take a census. This was a test (see 1 Chronicles 21:1), similar to the testing of Job, and of Peter (when Jesus allowed Satan to “sift him like wheat”): the Lord allowed Satan to tempt David. The purpose of a census would be to raise an army, or to raise taxes. It appears that David wanted to build up his own prestige, either by military conquest, building projects, or personal enrichment. He was tempted to exalt himself, at the expense of God’s people, and compromising the holiness of the nation. Despite Joab’s opposition, the census is taken. David then confesses his sin and seeks forgiveness.

The prophet Gad offers a choice of punishments, and David chooses three days of pestilence. So the death angel slays 70,000 throughout the land, but relents when he comes to Jerusalem. When David sees the angel, he offers a prayer of intercession for the people. David then erects an altar at Arauna's threshing floor, to give a burnt offering. This later became the site for Solomon’s temple.

In this plague, the people of Israel were punished for David’s sins. This is the nature of human community: that many people can suffer the consequences of one person’s sin. Because of our interdependencies and influence, there is no such thing as a “victimless” sin.

In the life of David, we see the blessings of faithfulness, the curses of unfaithfulness, and a model of repentance and forgiveness. The Lord is faithful to His promises, but does not leave the guilty unpunished (Exodus 34:7). These punishments are not only for discipline, but for the sake of God’s name – that He not be blasphemed for tolerating sin. David is thus the prototype of God’s “Servant” and of God’s “Son”: a prototype applicable to individuals, to the nation, and to the coming Messiah.

# 1st Kings 1 - 16

This section of the book of Kings covers the reign of Solomon and the history of the subsequently divided kingdom up to the time of Elijah, approximately 970 – 870 BC. Israel was at its height of wealth and power under Solomon, but he set the stage for spiritual and moral decline that would eventually lead to their destruction [1].

1 Kings 1 - Near the end of David’s life, Adonijah, David’s third son, sought to establish himself as king. But Nathan and Bathsheba told David of the insurrection, and David arranged for the public declaration of Solomon (God’s choice) to be his successor.

1 Kings 2 -- David charges Solomon to *“be strong, and show yourself a man”,* and to walk according to the Law. He also instructs Solomon to execute justice against Joab and Shimei. David then dies, and Solomon ascends to the throne. Adonijah requests to be given David’s concubine, Abishag, which Solomon interprets as an act of rebellion. He therefore executes Adonijah, as well as Joab and Shimei. He thus secures his power as king.

1 Kings 3 -- Solomon forms an alliance with Egypt by marrying the Pharaoh’s daughter: an exceptional political move, for Egypt as well as for Israel. In this early phase of his reign, Solomon was faithful to the law. The Lord spoke to him in a dream, saying: *“Ask what you wish me to give you”*, and Solomon responded by asking for wisdom, to know how to judge the people. God then says He will give Solomon extraordinary wisdom, as well as riches and honor. Solomon then demonstrates this gift of wisdom in judging a custody dispute between two women – each claiming to be the mother of a baby.

1 Kings 4 -- The major officials are listed, and Solomon’s wealth and wisdom are extolled.

1 Kings 5-8 -- Solomon acquires timber from king Hiram of Tyre and conscripts laborers, to build the temple, the two bronze pillars, the brazen sea and the altar. The ark of the covenant is then placed in the temple, and Solomon offers a prayer of dedication [2].

1 Kings 9 -- The Lord again appears to Solomon, and promises to establish his throne forever, if he walks according to all that has been commanded. But the Lord also warns that if he turns away from the commandments, then He will cast Israel out of the land.

1 Kings 10 -- The queen of Sheba visits Solomon, and is immensely impressed by his wisdom and his wealth. It should be noted, however, that his extravagances violate the instructions in the Torah, that the king *“shall not multiply horses…shall not multiply wives… nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself.”* (Deuteronomy 17:16,17)

1 Kings 11 -- Solomon acquired many foreign wives and concubines, who turned his heart to serve their foreign gods, despite the warnings in Deuteronomy 7:2-4. Consequently, the Lord tells him *“I will surely tear the kingdom from you, and will give it to your servant.”* God then raises up adversaries: Hadad, of Edom, and Rezon, of Damascus. Also, the prophet Ahijah tells Jeroboam that the northern 10 tribes will be taken away from Solomon’s successor and be given to him to rule. Solomon then dies, after reigning for 40 years (indicating a relatively short life, of 60 years or less).

1 Kings 12 -- Solomon is succeeded by his son Rehoboam. Jeroboam, representing the northern tribes of Israel, asks Rehoboam to lighten the hard burdens that Solomon had placed upon them. Rehoboam is counseled by the elders to do as Jeroboam requested, but he instead took the advice of his younger friends, and answered that he would add to their yoke, and increase their discipline. Consequently, the northern tribes of Israel rebelled and made Jeroboam their king. Jeroboam then established shrines for idol worship, at Dan and at Bethel, so his people would not have to go to Jerusalem to sacrifice. He also established his own feast, and appointed his own priests, who were not Levites.

1 Kings 13 -- A prophet speaks against the altar in Bethel, declaring that a future king, Josiah, would sacrifice the priests of the high places upon it. As a sign, the altar was then split apart. This prophet had been commanded by the Lord to depart by a different way than the way he had come. That would demonstrate his disapproval and rejection of the place he had visited. However, he disobeyed the command, and was therefore attacked and killed by a lion. Jeroboam’s institution of false worship and a false priesthood *“became sin to the house of Jeroboam, even to blot it out and destroy it from off the face of the earth”* (1 Kings 13:34).

1 Kings 14 -- Jeroboam’s son becomes sick, so he sends his wife to the prophet Ahijah, to inquire what will happen to him. The prophet’s answer is that because of Jeroboam’s sins, making other gods and molten images, the Lord would *“cut off from Jeroboam every male person…and make a clean sweep of the house of Jeroboam.”* Furthermore, the Lord will *“uproot Israel from this good land …and will scatter them beyond the River.”* In the southern kingdom (Judah), Rehoboam also does evil in the sight of the Lord, worshipping in the high places, building pillars and Asherim, practicing “all the abominations of the nations”.

1 Kings 15 -- Abijam succeeds Rehoboam as king of Judah, and continues his evil practices. There is continual warfare between Israel (the north) and Judah (the south). Abijam is then succeeded by Asa, who did what was right, removing the idols from the land. In Israel, Baasha conspires against the king, Nadab, and kills him, and all the household of Jeroboam, thus fulfilling the prophesied judgment against Jeroboam.

1 Kings 16 -- However, Baasha also walks in the way of Jeroboam. Therefore, the prophet Jehu announces: *“I will consume Baasha and his house, and I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam.”* This is fulfilled when Baasha’s successor, Elah, and all of his household, are killed by Zimri. The people then made Omri their king, who builds the city of Samaria. He was then succeeded by Ahab, *“who did evil more than all who were before him”*. In particular, he married Jezebel, and worshiped Baal.

The splendor of Solomon’s reign shows what God can provide for His people when they are faithful to Him. But the judgments against Solomon’s descendants, and against the kings of the Northern kingdom, show the consequences of unfaithfulness. God cannot allow His people to serve the false gods of this world.

# 1st Kings 17 – 2nd Kings 10

This section is known as the “Elijah/Elisha cycles”: a narrative focusing on the prophetic ministries of Elijah and Elisha.

1 Kings 17 - Elijah prophesies a drought, demonstrating YHWH’s authority over weather, the supposed domain of Baal. He obtains help and hospitality from the widow of Zarephath, and demonstrates God's provision for those who live by faith. Several years later, Elijah raises her son from the dead, firmly establishing him as a true prophet.

1 Kings 18 - Elijah arranges a contest between himself and the prophets of Baal. He assembles the people to Mt Carmel, and challenges them: *“How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If YHWH is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.”* Each side is to construct an altar and offer a sacrifice. The god who answers by fire shall be the true God. Baal’s prophets fail at their attempts, but Elijah dramatically succeeds. Elijah then orders the execution of the prophets of Baal, and the drought is ended.

1 Kings 19 – Jezebel seeks vengeance against Elijah, and he flees, in despair. On Mt. Horeb, the Lord presents him with a mighty wind, an earthquake, and fire. But God is not in them. This is followed by a gentle blowing. Most often, the evidence of God’s providence is not in dramatic and violent events, but rather in the gentle influence of His Holy Spirit. God tells him to anoint Elisha as successor prophet, and Jehu as King.

1 Kings 20 - Ahab defeats Ben-hadad, king of Aram, in two battles. But he is then condemned by a prophet for bargaining for peace with Ben-hadad.

1 Kings 21 – Ahab wants to purchase a neighboring vineyard from Naboth, but Naboth refuses to sell. Jezebel therefore arranges for Naboth to be falsely accused of blasphemy and to be stoned, so that Ahab could seize his vineyard. Elijah then confronts him, and prophesies his death, the death of Jezebel, and the termination of his line of descendants.

1 Kings 22 - Another battle is fought against Ben-hadad. All the false prophets tell Ahab he will win, but Micah prophesies their defeat. As prophesied, they lose the battle, and Ahab is killed. Ahaziah succeeds Ahab, and continues his evil ways.

2 Kings 1 - Ahaziah is injured in a fall, and sends messengers to inquire of Baal-zebub (god of Ekron) concerning his fate. Elijah rebukes the messengers for not inquiring of YHWH. He says that Ahaziah will not recover. There are three failed attempts, by “captains of fifty”, to intimidate Elijah. After this, Ahaziah dies.

2 Kings 2 - When it is time for Elijah to be "taken away", Elisha asks for a double portion of his spirit. Elijah answers that if Elisha witnesses his departure, the Lord will grant the request. Elisha then sees a chariot of fire and Elijah being swept away by a whirlwind. He then picks up Elijah's mantle, signifying he shall be the successor prophet.

2 Kings 3 - Ahaziah is succeeded by his brother, Jehoram, as king of Israel. To put down a rebellion from Moab, he formed an alliance with Judah and Edom, and their combined army set out for battle. When they could find no water, they sought the counsel of the prophet Elisha, who tells them to dig trenches. The Lord then filled the trenches with water, and when the Moabites saw the water, in the light of the sunrise, they thought it was blood. Thinking that the three armies had fought and destroyed each other, the Moabites rushed in to take the spoil. The Israelites counter-attacked, and defeated the Moabites.

2 Kings 4 – An impoverished and indebted widow, who has nothing but a jar of oil, appeals to Elisha for help. He instructs her to borrow empty vessels from all her neighbors, and to fill them from her jar of oil. When she did this, she was able to fill all the vessels with oil. She could then sell the oil and pay off all her debts.

A Shunamite woman, who is childless, regularly provides hospitality to Elisha. In return for her kindness, Elisha tells her that she shall bear a son. Years later, the son became ill and died. She then went to Elisha for help, and Elisha came to her home, stretched himself out over the body of the son, and brought him back to life.

2 Kings 5 - Naaman, captain of the army of Aram, is afflicted with leprosy, and comes to Elisha to be healed. Elisha instructs him to wash in the Jordan river seven times, to be restored. Initially Naaman refuses. His servant, however, convinces him to obey: *“My father, had the prophet told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, ‘wash, and be clean’?”* When Naaman then obeys, he is healed.

2 Kings 6 - In the continuing warfare between Aram and Israel, Elisha repeatedly provides counsel to the king of Israel on the location of Aram’s army. When the king of Aram discovers what Elisha is doing, he sends his army out to surround and besiege the city of Dotham, where Elisha is staying. When Elisha’s servant informs him of this, Elisha answers: *“Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”* Elisha then prays that the servant’s eyes be opened, and as a result he could see the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. The Lord then delivered Israel by striking the Aramean army with blindness.

2 Kings 7 - At a later time, the army of Aram besieges Samaria, and the Lord delivers them, causing the army to flee, by making them hear the sound of chariots and horses.

2 Kings 8 – Elisha prophesies that Ben-hadad, king of Aram, will recover from an illness, but that he would be assassinated and succeeded by his servant Hazael. In Judah, Jehoshaphat is succeeded by Jehoram, who is then succeeded by Ahaziah.

2 Kings 9, 10 – Elisha instructs one of the prophets to anoint Jehu as the next king of Israel. Jehu then kills Joram (king of Israel), Ahaziah (king of Judah), Jezebel, and all the rest of Ahab’s sons. He thus terminates the household of Ahab, fulfilling Elijah’s word, and he totally eradicates Baal worship.

In this section of Kings, the point is made that it is the word of God that is decisive in history, for judgment and deliverance. It is the prophets, and not the kings, who are *“the chariots and horsemen of Israel”* (2 Kings 2:12; 13:14).

# 2nd Kings 11 - 25

This third section of Kings, covering approximately 815 BC to 587 BC, tells of the final decline and fall of the northern kingdom (Israel) and the southern kingdom (Judah), and provides the theological explanation.

2 Kings 11, 12 -- After the death of Ahaziah, king of Judah, his mother, Athaliah, assumed the throne, and she assassinated all the other royal offspring. But the youngest son, Joash (or Jehoash), was rescued and hidden in the temple. Six years later, the “captains of the hundreds” deposed and killed Athaliah, and made Jehoash the next king. Thus the royal line of David was preserved. During his reign, Jehoash arranged for special offerings so that needed repairs could be made to the temple. After a 40-year reign, he was assassinated by his servants.

2 Kings 13 -- Jehoahaz succeeds Jehu as king of Israel, in Samaria. When he died, his son, Jehoash became king. They both were evil, “following the sins of Jeroboam”. The prophet Elisha becomes ill and dies. The king honors him with the epitaph: *“My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!”*

2 Kings 14 -- Amaziah, successor of Jehoash as king of Judah, fights against Jehoash of Israel, and is defeated and captured. At the death of Jehoash, he is succeeded by his son Jeroboam II as king of Israel. Fifteen years later, in Judah, Amaziah is assassinated in an insurrection, and replaced by his son, Azariah. After a reign of 41 years, Jeroboam II dies, and is succeeded by Zechariah.

2 Kings 15 -- In Israel, Zechariah is assassinated by Shallum, who then becomes king. Subsequently, Shallum is assassinated and succeeded by Menahem, who is forced by King Pul of Assyria to pay tribute. When Menahem dies, he is succeeded by Pekahiah, who is then assassinated and succeeded by Pekah. During his reign, Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, captured a large portion of the land and took captives into Assyria. Hoshea then assassinates Pekah and becomes king in his place. In Judah, Jotham succeeds Azariah as king, who is then succeeded by his son Ahaz.

2 Kings 16 -- Ahaz was an evil king, sacrificing on the high places, and making his son “pass through the fire”. He paid Tiglath-pileser of Assyria to deliver him from Aram and Israel. After a 16-year reign, he died, and was succeeded by Hezekiah.

2 Kings 17 -- Shalmaneser, king of Assyria, forces Hoshea to pay tribute. Hoshea then stops paying tribute, and seeks help from Egypt. In response, Shalmaneser captures and imprisons Hoshea, invades the land, and besieges Samaria for three years. Samaria then falls, and all of Israel is exiled to Assyria. The explanation for the fall of Israel is that they had sinned against the Lord, by walking in the customs of the nations, rejecting the Lord’s covenant. In particular, they were guilty of:

* 1. building high places, sacred pillars, Asherim,
  2. making molten images,
  3. worshiping the host of heaven,
  4. serving Baal,
  5. making sons and daughters pass through the fire,
  6. practicing divination and enchantments

In summary, they sold themselves to do evil. The king of Assyria brought foreigners into the land, who worshiped their own gods in addition to YHWH.

2 Kings 18-19 -- Hezekiah, king of Judah, did right in the sight of the Lord: he removed the high places, and broke down the pillars and Asherah. His faith in the Lord was greater than any who were before him. In the 14th year of his reign, Sennacherib, king of Assyria, seizes the fortified cities of Judah and demands that Hezekiah surrender, claiming that YHWH cannot deliver them. Hezekiah sends a message to the prophet Isaiah, who assures him of deliverance. The king of Assyria later sends a letter to Hezekiah, warning him to not trust YHWH, claiming none of the gods of other nations could deliver them, and neither can YHWH. Hezekiah goes to the temple and prays to the Lord: *“deliver us from his hand that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone O Lord, are God.”* Isaiah gives the Lord’s answer against Sennacherib: *“Because of your raging against me, and because your arrogance has come up to My ears, therefore I will put My hook in your nose and My bridle in your lips, and I will turn you back by the way which you came.”* He then promises to Hezekiah: *“I will defend this city to save it for My own sake and for My servant David’s sake.”* The angel of the Lord then struck down the Assyrian army, and Sennacherib returned to Nineveh, where he was later assassinated while worshiping his god Nisroch.

2 Kings 20 -- Hezekiah became ill, and the Lord reveals, through Isaiah, that he shall die. Hezekiah then offers a prayer, that the Lord would remember his faithfulness. In response, Isaiah tells him that 15 years will be added to his life.

2 Kings 21-23 -- Manasseh then succeeds Hezekiah, and “did evil in the sight of the Lord”. The prophets warn that the kingdom of Judah and Jerusalem shall be destroyed. His grandson, Josiah, did right before the Lord. A book of the law was discovered in the temple, probably Deuteronomy, on the basis of which Josiah instituted many reforms, bringing Judah into compliance with the covenant. Because of his repentance and reforms, the destruction of the land would be delayed until after his death. Josiah was then succeeded by Jehoahaz. Pharaoh Neco imprisons him and appoints Jehoiakim to be king.

2 Kings 24-25 -- Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, then forces Jehoiakim to serve him. After three years, Jehoiakim rebels, and Nebuchanezzar sends armed forces into Judah to raid and destroy the land. Jehoiakim was then succeeded by Jehoiachin, and Nebuchadnezzar besieges Jerusalem. He takes Jehoiachin captive, carries away all the treasures from the temple and the palace, and exiles all the mighty men to Babylon. He then appoints Zedekiah as king in Jerusalem. Nine years later, because of Zedekiah’s rebelliousness, Nebuchadnezzar again besieges Jerusalem, and totally destroys the city and the temple. All of Judah was then exiled to Babylon.

The fall and destruction of both Israel and Judah, and the exiles to Assyria and Babylon, are explained as necessary judgments by YHWH, for their breaking the covenant – especially their idolatry and worship of other gods. The Lord was exceedingly patient, giving many warnings through prophets. But the final judgments were inevitable and just, for they had *“sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord”* – 2 Kings 17:17.

Notes on Kings

[1] This book teaches the later generations of Israelites that their exile in Babylon was a just punishment for centuries of idolatry. They had defiled the land, and because of this, they were expelled.

[2] The beauty of the temple informs us of the exceeding blessedness of dwelling with the Lord, as is expressed in Psalm 27:4; 84:10. Fellowship with the Lord is to be our greatest desire, and that is expressed by making His dwelling place to be as beautiful and luxuriant as can be imagined.

# Isaiah 1 - 39

Isaiah marks the beginning of the “latter prophets”, where we find a deeper revelation of God, as the One who is not only Creator and King, but Who also passionately loves His people. The latter prophets advance beyond the letter of the law to explicitly present the spirit of the law. They look beyond the immediate historical issues, and reveal God's ultimate purpose, to be fulfilled in the latter days. They describe a family relationship between God and His people, calling them His son or wife. It is the “zeal of the Lord” that accomplishes His purpose. And God's people are expected to respond in like manner: to love God in a genuine relationship. Lip service and empty ritual are not enough; He asks for heartfelt obedience.

Isaiah 1 -- God's children have strangely rebelled against Him, and refuse correction. Judgment is therefore imminent. He rejects their sacrifices, but is looking for genuine repentance:

*“When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you…Your hands are covered with blood”* (1:15). *“Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless, defend the orphan, plead for the widow”* (1:16-17). *"Come now, and let us reason together, …Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool."* (1:18).

God wants obedience, not sacrifice, and He prefers obedience based on understanding, not a blind obedience to commands. He therefore takes the trouble to reason with us, and asks us to listen to reason. He also explains that the judgment against Israel and Judah will not be a total destruction, but rather a purge, where a remnant will be preserved. It is in this remnant that there is hope, and a future, and fulfillment of the promises.

Isaiah 2-4 -- The Lord reveals His ultimate intent and purpose: to establish Zion as the chief mountain, where all nations will come to worship and to receive the law, and all will dwell in peace. *“They will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they learn war.”* (2:4). The Lord appeals to Israel to repent, and warns that there will be a day of reckoning, when all who exalt themselves will be judged.

Isaiah 5 -- In the parable of the vineyard, the Lord lovingly cares for His vineyard, with high expectations for its produce. But it utterly failed to produce good grapes (5:2), and He therefore abandoned it. *“He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress.”*(5:7) He therefore declares woes upon His people*: “Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil…to those who are wise in their own eyes”* (5:20-21). They will *“go into exile for their lack of knowledge”* (5:13).

Isaiah 6 – Isaiah sees a vision of the Lord, and is called to be a prophet: *“Go, and tell this people: keep on listening, but do not perceive; keep on looking, but do not understand. Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, otherwise they might…return and be healed”*(6:9-10).This verse speaks of the hardening of hearts when a rebellious people are confronted by God’s word.

Isaiah 7-8 -- Isaiah now turns to more immediate historical concerns. He is sent to king Ahaz, to tell him to not fear Aram and Ephraim. As a sign, the Lord says: *“A virgin (young woman) will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.”* (7:14). This is quoted by Matthew as a prophecy of Jesus’ birth, but the original and immediate meaning is that a child will soon be born, and before he reaches the age of accountability (~12 years), the land of Aram and Ephraim will be laid waste (7:15-25; 8:1-8). They should fear the Lord, not man. And instead of consulting mediums and spiritists, they should consult their God: *“To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn.”* (8:20).

Isaiah 9 –In the latter days: *“A child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace…”* (9:6-7).

Isaiah 10 – Assyria will be used by the Lord to execute judgment, but they too will be judged, for their arrogance. After this, a remnant of Jacob will return to the land.

Isaiah 11 – Looking again to the latter days: *“A shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.”*(11:1-2)*.* Associated with this Messianic prophecy is a vision of His eternal kingdom: *“The wolf will dwell with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the young goat…. They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord”* (11:6-9).

Isaiah 12 –27 -- Isaiah prophesies against all the kingdoms that have opposed the Lord’s people, especially Babylon (13:1-22;14:1-23). In the “valley of vision”, the destruction of Judah is foreseen (22:1-14). The fall of Tyre, in her arrogance, is foretold (23:1-18); then, the final judgment upon all the earth (24:1-23). But in the Lord’s eternal kingdom, “*He will swallow up death for all time, and the Lord God will wipe tears away from all faces.”* (25:8).

Isaiah 28 – 31 -- The captivity of Ephraim is predicted, and warnings are given to Judah: “*This people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote.”* (29:13).

Isaiah 32 – 35 -- In the day of the Lord, there will be wrath for the nations, but glory and peace in His eternal kingdom. For Edom: *“Its land will become burning pitch. It will not be quenched night or day; its smoke will go up forever.”* (34:9-10). But for Zion: “*The eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will shout for joy. For waters will break forth in the wilderness and streams in the Arabah.”* (35:5-6).

Isaiah 36 – 39 -- This section relates the historical events during the reign of Hezekiah, repeating the text of 2 Kings 18-20.

Isaiah speaks of the judgment that would soon come upon Israel, and warns Judah that they too must repent, or face a similar fate. Interwoven with the message of judgment, is the promise of a remnant that will be restored. He then looks beyond the history of his own time to see the final “day of the Lord”, when all the nations shall be judged, and when the Prince of Peace will establish His eternal kingdom.

# Isaiah 40 - 66

This section of Isaiah speaks to a later generation, giving exhortation and hope to the exiles. In like manner, he speaks to us, that we might know our God, and have hope for the future. But most importantly, he spoke to Jesus, by Whom the prophecies are fulfilled [1].

Isaiah 40 – Here is a word of comfort to God’s people: *“A voice is calling, clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God”* (40:3). A road is to be prepared for God, the warrior king with his armies, so He can deliver and save His people. John the Baptist said that he was this voice, calling the people to repentance, to receive the Messiah. Isaiah then assures us that God’s word shall not fail: *“All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field… The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever”* (40:6,8). The Lord is the Creator, and almighty; none can compare, or prevail against Him. *“The nations are like a drop from a bucket”* (40:15). He can therefore give strength to the weary: *“They will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired…”* (40:31).

Isaiah 41 -- The Lord has not abandoned Israel; He will redeem and deliver them.

Isaiah 42 -- The Lord promises to send a Servant: “*Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; … I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations…A bruised reed He will not break and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish”* (42:1,3). The Lord appoints His people to be *“a light to the nations, to open blind eyes”* (42:6,7) [2].

Isaiah 43 -- The Lord, their Creator, assures them: *“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine!”* (43:1). He will destroy Babylon, and will redeem Israel, and forgive them their sins: *“I, even I, am the One who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins”* (43:25).

Isaiah 44-48 -- For their descendants, the Lord promises: *“I will pour out water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring and My blessing on your descendants”* (44:3). He declares: *“I am the first and I am the last, there is no God besides Me”* (44:6), and He then ridicules the folly of idolatry. Chapter 44 closes with a very specific prophecy of their deliverance from exile: *“It is I who says of Cyrus, ‘he is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.’ And he declares of Jerusalem, ‘She will be built,’ and of the temple, ‘Your foundation will be laid.’”* (44:28). The Lord, as Creator, asserts His power over all nations, so they will ultimately submit and serve Him: *“The word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness and will not turn back, that to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance”* (45:23).

Isaiah 49-50 -- The Lord will raise up His Servant, to restore Israel, and to be *“a light to the nations”* (49:6). He will be despised and abhorred, but in time, *“Kings will see and arise, Princes will also bow down”* (49:7). The Servant says: *“I gave My back to those who strike Me, and My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard”*, but *“I have set My face like flint, and I know that I will not be ashamed”* (50:6,7). *“The Lord God helps Me; Who is he who condemns Me?”* (50:9) [3]

Isaiah 51-52 -- The people are exhorted to wake up, and pay attention. *“Look to the rock from which you were hewn”* (51:1). They shall hear good news: *“How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who announces peace and brings good news of happiness, who announces salvation, and says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’”* (52:7). And the Lord’s Servant “*… will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted*” (52:13).

Isaiah 53 -- But the Lord’s Servant must also be a Suffering Servant: *“He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief”* (53:3). He will be sacrificed as a sin offering: “*He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities….The Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him…He would render Himself as a guilt offering*” (53:5,6,10). As a result, the people shall be delivered from sin, and the Servant shall be exalted: *“By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as he will bear their iniquities. Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great and he will divide the booty with the strong; because He poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors”* (53:11,12).

Isaiah 54-55 -- Israel will be reconciled to God, as an estranged wife to her husband (54:4-8). *“For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you”* (54:8). He invites all to accept mercy: “*Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost”* (55:1). “*Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near*” (55:6). He is ever willing to forgive, with a mercy far greater than man’s: *“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways…for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts”* (55:8,9). The Lord guarantees that His word will be fulfilled: *“So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty…”* (55:11).

Isaiah 56-57 -- The blessings of the Lord shall be to all peoples: *“My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples”* (56:7). He is accessible to the contrite and the lowly (57:15; 66:1-2); His peace is for all who will come: *“Peace, peace to him who is far and to him who is near”* (57:19) [3].

Isaiah 58-59 -- The Lord had not responded to their fasting, because it was hypocritical: *“Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke?”* (58:6). The Lord is able to save, but “*your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He does not hear.”* (59:2).

Isaiah 60-66 – Isaiah then speaks of the glory of the last days: *“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you”* (60:1). The promised Servant and Savior will say: *“the Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners; to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord”* (61:1-2). In Luke 4:18-19 Jesus reads this, and declares it *“has been fulfilled in your hearing”*. God rejoices over His people as a bridegroom over a bride, and they will be known as the redeemed, sought out (62:12). He is appealed to as our Father and Maker - we the clay, and He the potter (64:8). All promised blessings shall be realized, and His glory will fill the earth: *“I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things will not be remembered or come to mind”* (65:17). There will be no more tears, no more early death, no more labor in vain, no more unanswered prayer. He says to rejoice with Jerusalem, for *“I extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream”* (66:12). *“And it shall be from new moon to new moon and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all mankind will come to bow down before Me.”* (66:23)

Notes on Isaiah:

[1] The prophesies are written not only for us, but, more importantly, they were written for Jesus. He learned His mission from the scriptures. As presented in the Gospels, He was driven by the scriptures. What He did, was so that scripture would be fulfilled.

[2] The Lord is the one God, the Holy One. As the One Creator, He rules all the earth. There is none beside Him. Israel’s mission is therefore to all nations, and in the end, all nations will acknowledge Him.

[3] Beyond the royal aspects of the anointed Savior, He must also be the Servant. And more than that, the Suffering Servant. This role is first assigned to God’s people, corporately. But they failed to deliver. It would then be assumed and fulfilled, perfectly, by an individual person. That Servant, subsequently. is the model for the remnant, who will continue the servant-mission. In a similar way, Israel was God’s son, but failed to demonstrate the obedience of a son. The Messiah would be the perfect and true Son, and the subsequent remnant would also be true children, following His example.

# Jeremiah

Jeremiah, speaking to the generation that would experience the fall of Judah and exile to Babylon, repeats many of the themes found in Isaiah. But an important additional theme is that in the promised restoration, God will transform His peoples’ hearts. There will be a new and better relationship between God and His people, under a new and better covenant.

Jer 1 -- Jeremiah is called to be a prophet (1:4-10), in accordance with God’s pre-planning, from the womb. He objects (because of his youthfulness), but God reassures: He will give Jeremiah the needed words. He is called to break down and to build. This indicates the effectual power of God's word, executed through His prophets. A vision of an almond rod is used to make the next point. The name for the almond rod (shaqed) means "waker". A similar word is used in the next sentence, when he says that God will “watch over” (shoqed) His word. Just as the almond blossom is the harbinger of spring, God’s word will be promptly executed. There is then a vision of a boiling pot, foretelling an invasion from the North. Jeremiah will be persecuted for this unpopular message, but God says: *“I am with you, to deliver you”*.

Jer 2-6 -- The message he shall proclaim is that the Lord was faithful to them, but they were unfaithful to Him. They exchanged their glory for that which does not profit. They forsook the fountain of living waters, and made broken cisterns. (2:11-13). Here, as in other prophets, idolatry is described as harlotry (3:1-2; 5:7-9). The people are called to repentance, and restoration is promised: a restoration where things will be different (3:14-18). They will call Him "My Father" (3:19). There will be a new relationship and a new covenant, corresponding to the new creation (Isa 65:17). God will bring healing and transformation. They are stupid children, *“Shrewd to do evil, but to do good they do not know”* (4:22). Regarding their false priests and prophets, *“They have healed the brokenness of My people superficially, saying, ‘peace, peace,’ but there is no peace.”* (6:14). They are like the New Testament false teachers who accommodated “itching ears” (2 Timothy 4:3). Instead, the people should *“See and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it”* (6:16).

Jer 7-10 -- *“Do not trust in deceptive words, saying, ‘This is the temple of the Lord …’”* (7:40). They were seeking refuge in the temple, like criminals in a safe house: *“Has this house…become a den of robbers in your sight?”* (7:11). The Lord seeks obedience, not sacrifice: *“I did not speak to your fathers … concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this is what I commanded them: ‘Obey My voice…’”* (7:22-23). They cannot claim innocent ignorance, for they are willfully deceitful: *“through deceit they refuse to know Me”* (9:6). They are warned against human pride: *“Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me…”* (9:23-24). Idolatry is ridiculed, for there is none like the Lord: *“It is He who made the earth by His power, who established the world by His wisdom; and by His understanding He has stretched out the heavens.”* (10:12). We need instruction and correction from the Lord: *“I know, O Lord, that a man’s way is not in himself, nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps. Correct me, O Lord, but with justice; not with Your anger, or You will bring me to nothing.”* (10:23-24)

Jer 11-20 -- Jeremiah prays for justice, and the Lord answers. He is then instructed to buy a waistband and hide it in a rock by the Euphrates. After a few days, it was ruined. In like manner, the Lord will destroy Judah (13:1-11). *“Can an Ethiopian change his skin, or a leopard his spots?”* (13:23). There is a point where repentance becomes impossible, and all that remains is judgment: *“Those destined for death, to death; those destined for the sword, to the sword; those destined for famine, to famine; those destined for captivity, to captivity”* (15:2b). Jeremiah laments, and begins to falter, but the Lord exhorts him to remain faithful (15:10,18-21). The people’s sinfulness and self-deceit arise from the heart: *“The heart is more deceitful than all else, and is desperately sick”* (17:9). There is both hope and a warning, in that the Lord is able to change his plans, in response to His people: *“Like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel.”* (18:6). When Jeremiah is punished for his prophesying, he again laments to the Lord (20:7-18): *“Cursed be the day when I was born”.*

Jer 21-29 -- The promise of a Son of David is repeated: *“I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness.”* (23:5; 33:14-17). The Lord shows a vision of good figs, and bad: *“Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the captives of Judah… But like the bad figs…so I will abandon…the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land”* (24:1-10). The exile in Babylon will last for 70 years: *“This whole land will be a desolation and a horror, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years”* (25:11-12). *“When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you … to bring you back to this place. ‘For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope”* (29:10-11). In chapter 28, Hananiah prophesies peace, but is denounced as a false prophet.

Jer 30-33 -- When they are restored, it will be under a new covenant: *“I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be My people…”* (31:1-4). *“Behold, days are coming…when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah….I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, … saying ’know the Lord’, for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them…for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”* (31:31-34). This gets to the essence of the new covenant, fulfilling Deuteronomy 30:6. Their sins will be washed away, their hearts renewed, and they will all know the Lord.

Jer 34-45 -- This section presents various historical events, and interactions between Jeremiah and the kings (Jehoiakim and Zedekiah). Jerusalem is captured and destroyed; but a small remnant is allowed to stay in Judah. In opposition to Jeremiah’s prophesies, they go down to Egypt.

Jer 46-52 -- These final chapters include prophesies of judgment against all the nations who had been enemies of Israel (chapters 46 – 51); and chapter 52, which is nearly identical to 2 Kings 25, recounts the fall of Jerusalem.

# Ezekiel

Ezekiel, who resided with the exiles in Babylon, was a contemporary of Jeremiah, prophesying during the years of 593 to 571 BC. He reaffirms the themes of Isaiah and Jeremiah, but with special emphasis on the presence of God – an issue of special concern to exiles. He gave particular attention to the holiness required for God’s presence, and to the role of God’s Spirit in the future restoration. He also introduces the idea that full restoration requires the death of the old and a resurrection to new life in the new creation.

Ezekiel 1-3 -- Ezekiel sees visions of God’s glory, seated on a throne, supported and transported by four living creatures. God, supported by all of His creation, can be present everywhere, and He is all-knowing, with nothing hidden from His sight. The four living beings represent all living creatures, who are spiritually driven and empowered (the wheels that can go in all 4 directions). The Lord addresses Ezekiel as “son of man”, and commissions him to speak to the rebellious sons of Israel. His receipt of God’s word is represented as eating a scroll. As with Isaiah and Jeremiah, the Lord warns that the people will oppose him, but He will give him strength to stand up to them. The Lord later tells him he is to be a watchman for the house of Israel (3:17), with the life and death responsibilities of a watchman. In a later vision, the Lord tells him he will become mute, so that he will not be able to rebuke them. This is so they will receive the judgment they deserve.

Ezekiel 4-7 -- The Lord then tells Ezekiel to symbolically dramatize how the Lord bore the iniquity of Israel and Judah for all their years, the subsequent siege of Jerusalem, and their banishment. The Lord will thus put an end to their idolatry, and He will leave a remnant who will “know that I am the Lord”.

Ezekiel 8-10 -- Ezekiel then sees a vision of the abominations by which the temple had been defiled. Consequently, the glory of the Lord departs from the temple and hovers over His chariot-throne. Ezekiel pronounces judgment upon the leaders of Israel.

Ezekiel 11-17 -- The Lord again promises that the remnant will be gathered together from the nations and restored to their land. *“And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh … Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God”* (11:19-20). The Lord tells Ezekiel to carry out baggage, to enact the exile of the king and his court from Jerusalem, which will no longer be delayed. He condemns the false prophets who “*have misled My people by saying, ‘Peace!’ when there is no peace.”* (13:10). He also condemns the women who practice magic and divination. Destruction is assured; no one can deliver them, not even Noah, Daniel and Job. Jerusalem is a useless vine, which shall be burned, and Israel has been an adulterous harlot. Nevertheless, after their captivity, they shall be restored. He will establish an everlasting covenant, and they “shall know that I am the Lord” (16:62).

Ezekiel 18-20 -- The Lord recites the parable: “*the fathers eat the sour grapes, but the children’s teeth are set on edge*” (18:2), and says that it shall no longer apply. “*The soul who sins will die. But if a man is righteous….he will surely live*” (18:4,5,9). “*The son will not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself*”(18:20). This means that, although the judgment upon the nation cannot be averted, He is still giving individuals the opportunity to repent and to live. “*I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies…therefore, repent and live*” (18:32). Lamentation is therefore appropriate (chapter 19). Ezekiel then rehearses the history of Israel, and prophesies their restoration.

Ezekiel 21-24 -- The Lord will draw a sword against Israel, and the rulers will especially be judged for their dishonest gain and bloodshed. There is no alternative, for the Lord “*searched for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand in the gap before Me for the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one*.” (22:30). Israel and Judah are described as sisters who became harlots, so the Lord, who is a “jealous” God, shall judge them. As an empty pot that is placed upon coals to become heated to the melting point, to remove its impurities, Israel can be cleansed only by the most extreme judgment. As another sign, Ezekiel’s wife will die, and he is told to not mourn the loss. In like manner, when the temple is destroyed, neither will they mourn. They will be so stricken and stunned in grief, that they can only silently groan in misery.

Ezekiel 25-32 -- In these chapters are words of judgment for all the surrounding nations. Tyre is especially singled out, for their extraordinary pride and self exaltation.

Ezekiel 33-35 -- Ezekiel is told again (compare 3:17-21) that he is assigned as a watchman; the Lord wants to warn the wicked and give them opportunity to repent. Those who are convicted of sin can yet live, if they repent (33:10-11). When he then receives word that Jerusalem had been taken; the Lord opens his mouth, and he is no longer mute. He then rebukes the “shepherds” of Israel, for feeding themselves, and not the flock. The Lord Himself will therefore search for the lost sheep, and care for them “*I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest…I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick.*” (34:15-16). He will also “*set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them*” (34:23). This servant David will be their prince, and “*I will make a covenant of peace with them…and I will cause showers to come down in their season; they will be showers of blessing*” (34:25,26).

Ezekiel 36-37 -- Furthermore, “*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes…”* (36:26-27). Ezekiel then has a vision of a valley of dry bones. When he prophesied over the bones, they came together and acquired flesh. He then prophesied: “*Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they come to life*” (37:9). They then came to life, as a great army. This is explained: “*I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel…I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life, and I will place you on our own land*” (37:12,14). In the new kingdom, “*My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd….I will make a covenant of peace with them…. My dwelling place also will be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be my people.*” (37:24-28)

Ezekiel 38-48 -- Chapters 38 and 39 tell of a latter day invasion from an enemy nation (Gog), which shall be utterly destroyed. Chapters 40-47 present a vision of a new temple, carefully “measured” to assure it meets all the requirements as a holy place for the Lord. The Lord’s glory then fills the temple, and a faithful priesthood is established. As a result, waters of life will flow from the temple into all the land, and all the trees and creatures along the rivers shall have life (47:1-12). This is a picture of the new creation: a kingdom of peace and life everlasting, sustained by God’s presence.

# Hosea, Joel and Amos

Hosea was a contemporary of Isaiah, prophesying to Israel (northern Kingdom) prior to the Assyrian invasion. His prophetic calling was exceptional in the way that his personal family life illustrated the relationship between God and His people.

Hosea 1-3 – The Lord tells him to marry a harlot and to name the children: 1) Jezreel (meaning "to sow"), for He will destroy the kingdom; 2) Lo-ruhamah, for He will show no more compassion; 3) Lo-Ammi, for they are no longer His people. Hosea will thus dramatize Israel's situation in his own personal life. However, the Lord will later restore Israel. Those who were not His people will become the children of God (1:10). Great will be the day of Jezreel (when God performs what He has promised). In chapter 2, Israel is condemned, and shall be punished for spiritual adultery; they had turned to Baal for fertility and well-being, rather than to the Lord. The sin was not in the enjoyment of life, but in not giving credit where it is due. But the Lord will later take them back and restore them. He will sow them in the land, and make a new covenant: “*Where it is said to them, ‘you are not My people,’ it will be said to them, ‘you are the sons of the living God’*” (1:10; 2:23). In the 3rd chapter, Hosea is told to buy back his adulterous wife who had deserted him, thus dramatizing Israel’s future redemption by the Lord.

Hosea 4-5 – The Lord presents His case against the people, describing their moral corruption as well as their idolatry. The root of their problem is: “*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest. Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children”*(4:6).

Hosea 6-11 – Chapter 6 speaks of their later restoration: *“He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day, that we may live before Him”* (6:2). He then returns to speaking of their iniquities. “*They sow the wind and they reap the whirlwind*” (8:7). Chapter 11 reveals the compassion He has for them, as a Father for His son: “*When Israel was a youth I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son*” (11:1). “*How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I surrender you, O Israel?…My heart is turned over within Me, all my compassions are kindled*” (11:8) [1]. The Lord’s infinite capacity to forgive is like that of a parent towards rebellious children. Such love is illustrated by the parable of the prodigal son. “*I will not destroy Ephraim again, for I am God and not man*” (11:9). Unlike man, He is “*abounding in lovingkindness, and…forgives iniquity*” (Exodus 3:7).

Hosea 12-14 –Israel’s apostasy originated from their self-satisfied pride when the times were good (13:5-6). Their turning away from the Lord was a turning away from their only help; it was self-destructive (13:9). Their punishment is therefore unavoidable (13:12-14). But they are called to repentance, and after they return from captivity, “*I will heal their apostasy, I will love them freely*”(14:4).

Joel also is a prophecy of coming judgment, to be followed by restoration and renewal. He emphasizes the need for decision.

Joel 1:1-2:17 -- The first part of Joel describes God’s judgment as like an invasion of locusts, which totally devastates the land. They are called upon to repent: *“The day of the Lord is indeed great and very awesome, and who can endure it? ‘Yet even now,’ declares the Lord, ‘return to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, weeping and mourning; and rend your heart and not your garments’, Now return to the Lord your God for He is gracious and compassionate”* (2:11,12).

Joel 2:18-3:21 -- The second part of Joel speaks of deliverance and restoration. As with the other prophets, He sees beyond the historical restoration of Israelites to their land, to tell of the ultimate spiritual restoration of all God’s people: “*It will come about after this that I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind; and your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on the male and female servant I will pour out My Spirit in those days*” (2:28-29). Peter said that this was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, when the church was established (Acts 2:19) [2].

Amos prophesied during the earlier days of Hosea, when times were relatively prosperous and peaceful in the northern kingdom. He speaks from the perspective and background of a herdsman and farmer, not as a professional prophet (7:14). He is particularly detailed and comprehensive in presenting their social and economic sins against one another.

Amos 1-2 – In chapter 1, Amos pronounces judgment upon surrounding kingdoms, and in chapter 2 he turns to judgments against Judah [“*they rejected the law of the Lord and have not kept His statutes*” (2:4)] and Israel [“*they sell the righteous for money and the needy for a pair of sandals*” (2:6)]. The Lord is “weighted down” by their sin (2:13) [3].

Amos 3-6 -- Amos gives examples of cause-and-effect, and taking heed to warnings. “*Does a lion roar in the forest when he has no prey?...If a trumpet is blown in a city will not the people tremble?...A lion has roared! Who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken! Who can but prophesy?”* (3:4,6,8). He declares that the “*cows of Bashan…who oppress the poor, who crush the needy…*” will be taken away with meat hooks (4:1-2). Therefore, “*Prepare to meet your God, O Israel*” (4:12). Those who long for the “day of the Lord” should consider whether it will be their deliverance or their judgment. The Lord hates their festivals, assemblies and offerings (2:21-23). Instead, they must “*Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream*” (5:24). There are woes determined especially against the wealthy and the powerful. He loathes their arrogance (6:8).

Amos 7-9 -- In chapter 7 are two visions of judgment against the land, which are prevented by Amos’ intercessory prayer. But in a third vision, a plumb line is placed along a wall, indicating that the people shall be measured against the standards of God’s word. Similarly, a vision of a basket of summer fruit means that “*the end has come for My people Israel. I will spare them no longer*” (8:1-2) [4]. The day of judgment will not only mean physical and economic destruction, but also a famine for God’s word: “*Not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, but rather for hearing the words of the Lord*”. The resulting lack of knowledge will be the final blow that will destroy the nation (compare Hosea 4:6). There will be no place to hide on the day of judgment. They are reminded that their Lord is the Almighty Lord of all creation: “*The One who builds His upper chambers in the heavens and has founded His vaulted dome over the earth, He who calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out on the face of the earth. The Lord is His name*” (9:6). However, like the other prophets, Amos concludes with a message of hope for the remnant: *“I will restore the captivity of My people Israel, and they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them; they will also plant vineyards and drink their wine, and make gardens and eat their fruit. I will also plant them on their land, and they will not again be rooted out from their land which I have given them”* (9:14-15).

Notes on Hosea/Joel/Amos:

[1] As had been expressed in Ezekiel 18:32, the Lord has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather seeks their repentance. This is an example for God’s people: we have to accept the responsibility for exercising discipline, but should never find any joy or satisfaction in the final judgment against sinful people (only in the overall judgment that destroys sin and evil itself).

[2] The most important blessing for God’s people, and perhaps the all-encompassing blessing, is this pouring forth of the Spirit. In Luke 11:13, the gift of the Spirit is associated with all good gifts.

[3] We see here that there is a much higher standard set for God’s people than for the surrounding nations.

[4] In the Hebrew, there is a word-play between the word for “summer fruit” (qayits) and the word of “end” (qets).

# Obadiah, Jonah, Micah

Obadiah was probably written shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem (587 BC). It is an oracle against Edom, and against all nations, as well as a message of hope to Israel.

Obadiah 1-9 -- Edom (or “Esau”) is deceived by arrogance: *“Who will bring me down to earth”* (vs. 3). But there will come “that day” when they will be destroyed (vs 8,9).

Obadiah 10-14 -- The case is made against Edom: *“because of violence to your brother Jacob”* (see Amos 1:11). They had stood by and gloated while Jerusalem was attacked and destroyed. They also looted the city and cut down their fugitives (vs. 13,14)

Obadiah 15-21 -- On the day of the Lord, justice will be executed upon all the nations: *“As you have done, it will be done to you. Your dealings will return on your own head.”* (15). But for Israel: *“on Mount Zion there will be those who escape, and it will be holy….and the kingdom will be the Lord’s”* (17, 21).

Jonah, the “son of Amittai”, is probably the same person as in 2 Kings 14:25, a prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel (782-753 BC). There is a wide variety of opinions about the literary genre of Jonah, ranging from history to parable. But regardless of its genre, its purpose is to teach, and it has the full teaching authority of God’s word.

Jonah 1 – The Lord tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and “cry against it” with a prophecy of judgment. In an attempt to evade this mission, Jonah boards a ship to Tarshish (probably in Spain), hoping to escape the Lord’s reach. But the Lord sends a storm that threatens the ship, and the sailors are left with no choice but to toss Jonah into the sea, thus quelling the storm. The Lord then appoints a large fish to swallow Jonah, thus saving him from the sea.

Jonah 2 – This chapter is Jonah’s prayer of thanksgiving for deliverance. From the depths of the sea, he had prayed toward the holy temple (2:4,7; see 1 Kings 8:27-53), and was saved. The fish then vomited Jonah onto the dry land.

Jonah 3 – The Lord repeats his command to go to Nineveh, and this time Jonah obeys. He proclaims throughout the city: “*Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown*” (3:4). Surprisingly, the whole city repents, and they humble themselves before the Lord. The Lord therefore relents, and decides to not execute the prophesied judgment.

Jonah 4:1-4 – Jonah was greatly displeased that Nineveh had repented, and that they would not be judged. He had known that YHWH is “*a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity*” (4:2; Exodus 33:19; 34:6). This is why Jonah originally refused the mission. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrians, who were considered the most wicked nation that the world had known, because of the unprecedented brutality of their war-crimes. If anyone deserved the harshest of judgment and retribution, it was the Assyrians. So Jonah did not want to give them the opportunity to repent and to be saved. He rather wanted them to be fully punished for their sins. He was so consumed by hatred (or for justice, untempered by mercy), that if there were no vengeance, he begs the Lord to take his life: “*for death is better to me than life”*. But the Lord then questions Jonah: “*Do you have good reason to be angry?*” (4:4).

Jonah 4:5-11 -- Jonah then departs to a place where he can observe the city, to see what would happen (to wait 40 days, and see if the Lord would destroy the city). The Lord appoints a plant to grow up over Jonah and provide shade for him, which makes Jonah happy. But the next day, God appoints a worm to destroy the plant, as well as sending a scorching wind to assault Jonah. Because of this, Jonah again becomes angry, and begs for death. The Lord again asks Jonah if he has good reason to be so angry. Jonah had compassion for the plant, but no compassion for Nineveh. Jonah had compassion for the plant for purely selfish reasons. Shouldn’t God have much greater compassion for all the lost souls of Nineveh? (see Isaiah 19:24-25) This is left as an open question and challenge to all. It is the same challenge that Jesus presents: “*You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (Matthew 5:48). He asks for a perfect love, which includes a love for enemies: an attitude much different than what is natural to humanity (Isaiah 55:8-9). Also, see Ezekiel 18:23,32. The Lord calls us to have this same kind of love and compassion, to thus overcome evil with good.

Micah was an 8th century prophet, a contemporary of Isaiah. The name, Micah, means “*who is like YHWH?*”. His prophecy is especially strong in its denunciation of the sins of the wealthy and the Jerusalem elites.

Micah 1-2 -- Both Samaria and Jerusalem shall be utterly destroyed because of their idolatries. In chapter 2, he gives further reasons for the woes that will come upon them: they oppress the poor, as they rob and seize land (2:2,8,9). The chapter concludes with a promise of Messianic hope for the remnant (2:12-13) – they will be gathered as sheep, and be led forth by their King and Lord.

Micah 3:1-4:8 -- The rulers are denounced as those who “hate good and love evil”. The prophets lead the people astray, crying “peace”, when they should give warnings of judgment. The leaders take bribes, the priests and prophets preach for money. But in the last days, “*the mountain of the house of the Lord will be established as the chief of the mountains*” (4:1). In that day the Lord will reign, and there will be peace (4:3).

Micah 4:9-5:15 -- Israel’s suffering is compared to the labor pains of a woman in childbirth. They will go to Babylon as captives, but they shall be rescued and redeemed. In 5:2-5a, Micah encourages the people with another Messianic prophecy. From Bethlehem (city of David), a ruler will come forth; the mother who is in labor (Israel) shall give birth to a child, who will be their shepherd, and their peace.

Micah 6-7 -- God indicts Israel, recounting all that He had done for them in their history (6:1-5). The people respond by asking how they can come back to the Lord. What kinds of offerings are required (6:6-7)? Compare this to the question of Peter’s audience at Pentecost: “what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). The answer is: “*He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*” (6:8). Micah then denounces the wealthy merchants for their “wicked scales” and “deceptive weights” (6:11). The leaders seek bribes (7:3) and the children dishonor their parents (7:6). For all these things, they shall be judged. But in the end, there is a promise of forgiveness. “*Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love. He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.*” (7:18-19)

# Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

Nahum was probably written in the mid 7th century BC: after the fall of Israel, and prior to the decline of Assyria. It is an oracle directed against Nineveh, the capital of Assyria.

Nahum 1 -- The Lord is slow to anger, but He will assuredly execute vengeance upon His enemies “in whirlwind and storm”. He “*rebukes the sea and makes it dry; he dries up all the rivers*” (1:4). This is the typical representation of YHWH as the God who uses the power of wind to defeat the chaos of the waters (as in Genesis 1:2, and in dividing the Sea of Reeds in Exodus 14). At the same time, He is good to those who belong to Him (1:7). The judgment is good news for His people: “*Behold, on the mountains the feet of him who brings good news, who announces peace!*” (1:15).

Nahum 2-3 -- The Lord declares He is against Nineveh (2:13; 3:5), and describes their complete and everlasting destruction. “*There is no relief for your breakdown, your wound is incurable*” (3:19). But for the Lord’s own people, there is a message of hope: “*The Lord will restore the splendor of Jacob like the splendor of Israel, even though devastators have devastated them and destroyed their vine branches.*”(2:2)

Habakkuk prophesied about 609 – 598 BC, shortly prior to the invasion of Judah by Babylon. The book is a dialogue of questions and responses between Habakkuk and the Lord.

Habakkuk 1:1-4 – Habakkuk first poses a question that is often found in the scriptures: “*How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and You will not hear? I cry out to You, ‘Violence!’ yet You do not save*” (1:2). This pertains to all the injustices being perpetrated in Judah. It is an honest expression of impatience, which all of God’s people, in all ages, can relate to (e.g. Psalm 13:1-2; 22:1-2)

Habakkuk 1:5-11 -- This is the Lord’s response. He will raise up the Chaldeans (of Babylon), who will invade Judah and execute judgment. However, it is also noted that the Chaldeans will later be held accountable before God: “*They will be held guilty, they whose strength is their god*” (1:11). This is the pride and arrogance at the heart of all sinfulness: the “god” they rely upon and whom they worship is merely their own strength.

Habakkuk 1:12-2:1 -- In the face of this, Habakkuk expresses hope: “*Are you not from everlasting, O Lord, my God, my Holy One? We will not die.*” In spite of the coming devastation, his hope is in the everlasting God, which is the basis for the hope that “we will not die”. Nevertheless, he is distressed that God would use, seemingly with approval, the brutal and idolatrous Chaldeans, those who are even more wicked than the people of Judah. “*Why do You look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?*” (1:13).

Habakkuk 2:2-20 -- The Lord then responds, assuring Habakkuk that the Chaldeans, in turn, shall also be judged. It will be delayed, but it shall certainly be done: *“For the vision is yet for the appointed time; it hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; for it will certainly come, it will not delay”* (2:3). This too is an often repeated message in scripture: that we must wait patiently, with confidence, for God to execute justice “at the appointed time”. He then contrasts the Chaldeans and the righteous who will suffer under them: “*Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by his faith*” (2:4). The “proud one” refers to the Chaldeans (see 1:11). Their inner character is not right, it is “crooked”, and this is observable in their proud and arrogant behavior. On the other hand, those who are of righteous inner character will be known by their faith, and because of this, they will live. It is helpful to note the Chiastic structure of this verse:

The **proud** one,

His soul is **not right** within him;

But the **righteous**

Will live by his **faith**.

The “righteous” is opposed to the one who is “not right”. And the one who has faith is the opposite of the one who is proud. To have faith is to place your trust in God, which is the opposite of the pride that places trust in one’s own strength. The outcome of pride is death; the outcome of faith is life. This is quoted by Paul in Romans 1:17, to indicate that a faith-response to the gospel brings life, and in Galatians 3:11, to show that it is faith, not the Law, that is the basis for life. Faith (not observance of Law) is the observable evidence of righteousness; just as pride is the observable evidence of unrighteousness. The chapter concludes with the warning that the Lord shall speak His word of judgment: “*But the Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before him.”* (2:20).

Habakkuk 3 -- The prophet then responds with a prayer “*in wrath remember mercy*” (3:2). He sees the coming devastation, and says he must wait quietly for the day of distress (3:16). The book then closes with a hymn that expresses confidence in the Lord, in spite of whatever evils we must endure.

“*Though the fig tree should not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vines,*

*Though the yields of the olive should fail and the fields produce no food,*

*Though the flock should be cut off from the fold and there be no cattle in the stalls,*

*Yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation*” (3:17-18).

Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah (640-609 BC). It condemns Judah for their unfaithfulness, promising judgment against them, and ultimately against all the earth.

Zephaniah 1 -- The prophet admonishes: “*Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the Lord is near*” (1:7). Submissively listen to the Judge’s decree, and do not try to offer a defense. He warns those who “*say in their hearts ‘the Lord will not do good or evil’*” (1:12). This is a “practical atheism” (as in Psalm 10:4; 14:1). The day is “near and coming very quickly”(1:14), upon the whole earth. “*And all the earth will be devoured in the fire of His jealousy, for He will make a complete end, indeed a terrifying one, of all the inhabitants of the earth*” (1:18). As in Revelation, the prophet sees the end-of-days destruction of all things, and he also sees that the process begins with near-term events. The “day of the Lord” is both future (in its completion) and present (as partial fulfillment).

Zephaniah 2-3 -- He admonishes: “*seek righteousness, seek humility. Perhaps you will be hidden in the day of the Lord’s anger*” (2:3). This is followed by oracles against other nations (Gaza, Moab, Nineveh), as well as to Jerusalem. This is followed, as usual, with words of hope for the remnant: “*I will leave among you a humble and lowly people, and they will take refuge in the name of the Lord. The remnant of Israel will do no wrong and tell no lies…*”(3:12-13) “*I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will turn their shame into praise and renown in all the earth*” (3:19). He will save them from both their external enemies and from their internal sinfulness.

# Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

Haggai’s ministry is dated at 520 BC, 18 years after the Israelites had been delivered from Babylon. Although Cyrus had provided support for them to rebuild, the Israelites were now suffering hardship due to drought. They were discouraged and complacent, and failed to make progress on building the temple. It was Haggai’s mission to motivate them to proceed with this project, to be ready for the “day of the Lord”.

Haggai 1:1-15 -- Haggai addresses the governor (Zerubbabel) and the high priest (Joshua). He says the people should not allow the house of the Lord to lie desolate while they dwell in their own paneled houses. They should consider their ways, their priorities. The people then repent, and the Lord declares: “I am with you”. The Lord stirs up their spirit, and they began work on the temple.

Haggai 2:1-9 -- One month later, Haggai again speaks to Zerubbabel and Joshua. They are discouraged when they compare the present desolation to the prior glory of Solomon’s temple. So he exhorts them: “*take courage, Zerubbabel…and all you people….and work; for I am with you*” (2:4). They are to perform works of faith (see 1 Thessalonians 1:3). This is followed by a promise to “shake all the nations”, so that they will bring their wealth. The Lord will provide the material resources that they lack.

Haggai 2:10-23 -- Haggai then speaks to the question of how an unclean people can build a holy temple. Even though they are unclean, the Lord promises: “*from this day on I will bless you*” (2:19). He will honor their repentance, and sanctify their work. The book ends with a promise to overthrow their enemies, and to appoint Zerubbabel as the Servant and King. Zerubbabel was in the line of succession from David to Jesus, and was a type for Christ, Who would be the final fulfillment.

Zechariah’s ministry immediately follows Haggai’s. He encourages them, through visions of hope, to persevere in the temple building project. This is apocalyptic literature, which unveils the meaning of the present by showing God’s plans for the last days.

Zechariah 1:1-6 -- This introduction explains the exile, and reminds them that God accepts those who repent: “*Return to Me, that I may return to you.*” (1:3)

Zechariah 1:7-17 -- This, the first of eight visions, is a vision of a horse patrol, who report that “*all the earth is peaceful and quiet*”. This is bad news for Israel, because it indicates that God’s promise to “shake the nations” has not yet begun. This prompts the question: “*How long will You have no compassion…?*” (1:12).

Zechariah 1:18-21 -- This is followed by a vision of four horns and four craftsmen. The number four indicates completeness, from all directions. The horns are the nations that had destroyed Israel, and the craftsmen are other nations that will destroy the four horns.

Zechariah 2:1-13 -- This is a vision of a man with a measuring line, to measure Jerusalem (to rebuild its walls). The angel declares, however, that Jerusalem shall not be bounded by walls, but it shall be protected by the Lord’s presence. The scattered Israelites are to flee from the foreign nations, which they will plunder (compare Exodus 12:35-36).

Zechariah 3 -- The high priest, Joshua, stands before the Lord, and is accused by Satan (the Accuser) for his uncleanness. The Lord rebukes Satan, saying He has chosen Joshua, and replaces his filthy garments with festal robes. The Lord thus cleanses Joshua, so that he can perform his priestly duties. The Lord also promises to send “My Servant the Branch” (3:8), i.e. the Messiah. The Messiah is also symbolized as a stone with seven eyes, i.e. the cornerstone, filled with the Spirit who has all knowledge. The Chiastic structure of chapters 1-6 indicates that chapters 3 and 4 present the main point of the section.

Zechariah 4 -- The lampstand with seven lamps, and two olive trees providing oil, represent the light that will shine forth through the anointed Priest and King. Zerubabbel is thus assured that he will be able to finish the work of the temple, “*Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit*” (4:6). They are not to despise “the day of small things”.

Zechariah 5:1-4 -- A vision of a flying scroll, with curses written on it, represents God’s word going forth to ultimately purge the earth of all iniquity.

Zechariah 5:5-11 -- An ephah (i.e. bushel) containing the woman “Wickedness” will be deposited in the land of Shinar (Babylonia). In God’s judgment and refining, wickedness is banished from the promised land, and isolated to those who willfully defy Him.

Zechariah 6 -- Four chariots represent God’s Spirit going forth throughout the Earth to appease His wrath against Israel’s enemies. This is followed by a prophecy of the Branch, who will build the temple, and who will rule on His throne.

Zechariah 7-8 -- The people of Bethel ask Zechariah whether they should continue their fastings. Zechariah’s answer is that the Lord desires justice and compassion (7:9-10) rather than fasting. He does not expect them to fast, but rather to “*speak the truth to one another... Also let none of you devise evil in your heart against another…*” (8:16-17).

Zechariah 9-11 -- This section pronounces judgment upon the nations, and blessings for Israel. The Messianic hope is repeated: “*Behold, your King is coming to you; …humble, and mounted on a donkey…*” (9:9-10). But their appointed Shepherd will be rejected, and sold for 30 pieces of silver (11:4-14).

Zechariah 12-14 -- In the last days, the Lord will establish Jerusalem as His Holy City. Regarding the Messiah: “*they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him.*” (12:10). “*Strike the shepherd that the sheep may be scattered*” (13:7). But in the end, “*The Lord will be king over all the earth…*” (14:9).

Malachi prophesied shortly prior to Ezra and Nehemiah, in the 460’s BC, about 50-60 years after Haggai and Zechariah. It was a time of spiritual dryness, and the challenge was to maintain faithfulness when God did not appear to be fulfilling His promises.

Malachi 1:1 – 2:9 – The book begins by remembering God’s choice of Jacob over Esau, indicating a covenant of election and grace. The people should therefore honor the Lord as their father, but instead they dishonor Him with unacceptable offerings.

Malachi 2:10 – 4:6 -- Malachi then admonishes them for their sins against one another. Among their moral failures, he singles out divorce, which the Lord hates (2:16). He then warns that when the Lord suddenly comes to His temple, it will be as a refiner’s fire (3:2). He says “*return to Me, and I will return to you*” (3:7). And, in order to return, they must no longer rob God, but “*bring the whole tithe into the storehouse*”(3:10). Finally, the Lord will send the prophet Elijah before the coming of the day of the Lord. For the next 400 years, up to the time of Jesus, the Jews were thus awaiting the return of Elijah.

We can summarize the message of these final three prophets as a summons to faith (Haggai), hope (Zechariah) and love (Malachi). This is the way to prepare for the Lord’s coming.

# Psalms -- Part 1

Introduction to the “Writings”: The entire Old Testament is sometimes referred to as the “Tanakh”, formed from the consonants TNK, which is an acrostic for Torah, Neviim (prophets), and Ketuvim (writings). The writings are inspired, but have a lesser authority than Torah and Prophets. Their authors make no specific claim of being called as prophets, and they do not proclaim “thus says the LORD”. They rely largely on general revelation, rather than from specific words from the LORD. They are concerned with obtaining a deeper knowledge of God, exploring unresolved mysteries, and providing resources for study, meditation and worship. The first section consists of three poetic books: Psalms, Proverbs and Job.

Introduction to the Psalms: Psalms is a collection of songs, often intended to be used in public worship, accompanied by instruments. The Psalms are divided into 5 books (chapters 1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, and 107-150). The first two books are prayers of David (see Psalm 72:20), while the other three books are attributed to several different sources. The Psalms have been categorized according to their use and content, as follows:

1) Praise Hymns (**8**, **19**, **33**, 66-67, **100**, **103**, 104, 111, **113**, 117, 145-**147**, 148-**150**)

2) Thanksgiving Hymns (**18**, 30, **32**, **34**, **40**, **65**, 75, 92, **107**, 116, **118**, 124, **136**, 138)

3) Lament (3-7, 10, 12, **13**, 14, 17, **22**, 25-28, 31, 35, 38-**40**, 41-**44**, **51**-**61**, 64, **69**-71, **74**, 77, 79-80, 83, 85-86, 88-**90**, 94, **102**, 109, 120, 123, 126, 129-130, 137, **139**, 141-143)

4) Liturgical (**15**, **24**, 50, **68**, 81, 82, 115, 134)

5) Wisdom (**1**, **14**, **19**, 25, 36, **37**, 49, **73**, **78**, **112**, **119**, **127**, **128**)

6) Trust (11, 16, **23**, 27, 62, 63, **91**, 121, 125, **131**)

7) Royal (2, 18, 20, 21, **29**, 45, 47, **72**, 78, **89**, **93**, **95**-99, 101, **110**, 132, 144)

8) Zion Hymns (**46**, 48, **76**, **84**, 87, **122**)

Many of the Psalms are Messianic, and below are some special examples referenced from the New Testament:

2:6-9 -- King and Son -- see Exodus 4:22; Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5; 5:5

8:3-8 -- Son of Man -- see Hebrews 2:5-9

16:10 -- The Holy One shall not undergo decay -- see Acts 13:35

22:1-7, 16-18 -- Forsaken and reproached -- see Matt 27:35, 39, 46

31:5 -- “I commit My spirit” -- see Luke 23:46

40:6-8 -- “I delight to do Your will” – see Hebrews 10:7-10

41:9 -- My close friend…has lifted his heel against Me” -- see John 13:18

45:6-8 -- Godhead – see Hebrews 1:8-9

68:18 -- He has ascended and taken captives -- see Ephesians 4:8-11

69: 4, 8-9 -- Hated without cause; zeal for the House -- see John 2:17; 15:25

69:21 -- “gave Me vinegar to drink” -- see John 19:28-30

89:18-29 -- Exalted to firstborn, the highest of the kings, established forever

110:1-7 -- King and Priest -- see Hebrews 1:13; 5:6, 9-10; 6:10; 7:17-21

118:22-24 -- The Stone -- see Matt 21:42; Luke 20:17-18; Eph 2:20; 1 Peter 2:7

Poetic Devices: Some of the poetic features cannot be preserved in translations, such as rhythm, alliteration and puns. An example of consonance occurs in the first three words of Psalm 1:1 – *Ashre ha-ish asher…* [Blessed is the man that…]. Other devices pertain to structures of the content and use of figurative language: features that can be translated.

Parallelism is especially prominent in the poetic books. Following are examples of **synonymous** **parallelism**, where the 2nd line has the same general thought as the 1st line:

*“What is man that You take thought of him,*

*and the son of man that you care for him?* -- Psalm 8:4

*“Keep me as the apple of the eye;*

*Hide me in the shadow of Your wings”* -- Psalm 17:8

*“The earth is the Lord’s, and all it contains,*

*The world, and those who dwell in it.*

*For He has founded it upon the seas*

*And established it upon the rivers.*

*Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord?*

*And who may stand in His holy place?* -- Psalm 24:1-3

In **antithetic** **parallelism**, the 2nd line states the opposite of the 1st line.

*“With the pure you show Yourself pure,*

*And with the crooked You show yourself astute.” -- Psalm 18:26*

*“Some boast in chariots and some in horses,*

*But we will boast in the name of the Lord, our God.*

*They have bowed down and fallen,*

*But we have risen and stood upright” -- Psalm 20:7-8*

*“The wicked borrows and does not pay back,*

*But the righteous is gracious and gives.”* -- Psalm 37:21

Another important devise is metaphor. Consider Psalm 23. The metaphor of sheep being rested and nourished by their shepherd corresponds to restoration of the soul and guidance in the paths of righteousness. The Lord’s protection in the face of death is like the protection of a shepherd’s rod and staff. God’s provision, even in the face of enemies, is like that of a banquet table and anointing with oil. Finally, everlasting fellowship with the Lord is described as dwelling in His house.

The Psalms express the deepest meditations of the heart in a manner designed to speak to the heart. The Psalms of praise, thanksgiving and trust can raise our level of consciousness of God, and instill a more deeply felt love for Him, especially in worship and in prayer. The prayers of lament encourage us to offer similar prayers that honestly lay our burdens before the Lord. And the prayers of penitence and of wisdom are profitable for instruction and training in righteousness, given in a poetic form, which can be treasured in the heart.

# Psalms -- Part 2

In this lesson, we consider the teachings from a few selected Psalms.

Psalm 19 – Revelation: The creation declares God’s glory, continuously revealing knowledge (19:1-2); but 19:3 says there is no speech, and their voice is not heard. The general revelation from creation is without literal “words”, and even though it goes out to all the world (19:4), it is not received with understanding and obedience. In contrast, 19:7 says that the Torah (law) “*is perfect, restoring the soul*”. Scripture accomplishes what general revelation cannot do: it brings people to repentance (see Psalm 119). Compare with Romans 1 regarding the failure of mankind to heed the general revelation (Rom 1:18-23), but the power of the gospel to save (Rom 1:16).

Psalm 104 – Praise for the Creator: YHWH is praised for His works of creation. Psalm 104:2 – 23 parallel the creation account of Genesis 1:1-25. Note particularly the initial state of waters (the deep) covering all things; but He then separates the waters, and establishes boundaries (Psalm 104:6-9; 74:13-17; Genesis 1:2,7,9). He then fills the creation with vegetation and living creatures (Psalm 104:10-26; Genesis 1:11-13,20-25). He also continues His works of providence, to sustain all life (Psalm 104:27-30).

Psalm 8 – Role and status of humanity: The LORD has displayed His splendor upon the heavens (compare Psalm 19:1), but His continuing works on earth are administered through his people. Children and infants, i.e. the weak and humble, in their praises and prayers, invoke the power of God to defeat His enemies. See Matthew 21:14-16. Verse 3 again considers God’s glory displayed in the heavens, and the Psalmist is amazed at the designated position of humanity. The word for “man” in verse 4 is *enosh*, meaning a mere, weak mortal. To be mindful of him is to remember and honor the promises and the mission that God has given to humanity: created in His image, to exercise dominion (Genesis 1:26-28). The parallel line refers to “son of man”, using the word *adam*, which is a generic term for mankind, for whom He cares. YHWH had decreed that mankind is second in command over all creation, and He is committed to honoring that decree.

Psalm 89 -- The Messiah: The mission and the glory designated for mankind is to be fulfilled in and through the Anointed One (Messiah). The covenant with David was to “*establish your throne to all generations*” (89:4). The Messiah will destroy all enemies, and He will rule over earth and sea. As the Firstborn, He will call upon YHWH as His Father (89:19-29). See also Psalm 110, where the Messiah is seated at the right hand of YHWH, “*until I make Your enemies a footstool*”.

Psalm 100 – Praise for His love: YHWH is to be praised with joyful shouts and joyful song, because He made us, and because we belong to Him. We are to give thanks (*todah* – confession, with extended hands), and sing praise (hallelujah’s), and bless His name (kneel before Him, to say “Your will be done”). The reason for such praise is that YHWH is good, and His love (*hesed*) is everlasting. See Romans 8:28, 35-39.

Psalm 113 -- Praise for His condescension: In verses 1-4, the glory and majesty of YHWH is praised in the highest terms, as it had been in many of the Psalms. But in verses 5-9, what really sets Him apart from any other “god” is that He “stoops down”, humbling Himself (113:5), to pay attention and attend to all that takes place in the heavens and the earth (as in 8:4). See Philippians 2:5-8. He does this to lift up the poor, and to answer the prayers of the barren woman. For these things, especially, we are to Praise the LORD!

Psalm 22 -- Lament of the forsaken: This lament begins with the typical question to God, asking why He is absent in our time of need: “*My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?*” David cries out day and night, but receives no answer. However, he knows that God is holy (22:2), and that God had delivered others (22:4-5). He considers himself a “worm”, reproached by everyone (22:6-8). On the other hand, YHWH had made him to trust in Him from his birth (22:9-10). Then, in verse 11, he appeals to YHWH to not be far from him. This seems to have a Chiastic structure:

A: verses 1,2 [God is far from him]

B: verses 3-5 [God is holy, and had delivered the fathers]

**X: verses 6-8 [he feels reproached and unworthy]**

B: verses 9-10 [YHWH had made him to trust in Him]

A: verse 11 [Be not far from me]

The central issue, in the center of the chiasm, is that he feels like a “worm”. In the next section he describes his troubles (22:12-18) and asks for deliverance (22:19-21). The Psalm ends in the traditional promise to offer praise and thanksgiving (22:22-31). Jesus quoted the first line from the cross (Matthew 27:46), indicating that He applied this complete Psalm to His own suffering. As is characteristic of laments, the consequence of trials is the establishment of hope, as taught in Romans 5:3-5 and James 1:2-4.

Psalm 51 – Prayer of penitence: Most of the laments seek deliverance from external enemies. But Psalm 51 is a prayer to be saved from our internal enemy: our own sin and guilt. This psalm, in particular, is David’s prayer of confession and repentance for his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah. He asks for grace (underserved mercy), solely on the basis of God’s love (*hesed*). Furthermore, what he seeks is not primarily deliverance from punishment. He asks rather to actually be cleansed of his sins (51:2,7). He confesses that it was truly sin against God, and that God is fully justified in judging him. This is true confession. He furthermore asks to be created anew, with a clean heart (51:10). He genuinely wanted to change, and asked of God the enabling power for renewal and transformation. That is true repentance. He knows that the only effectual offering to God in this situation is “*a broken and a contrite heart*” (51:17). See also Psalm 32 and 103, as encouragement to confess sins, and seek forgiveness.

Psalm 23 -- Trust in our Shepherd: This psalm is primarily an expression of trust; but, like a lament, it is motivated by a threat of danger. It has a Chiastic structure as shown below:

A: verse 1 [YHWH is my shepherd: “*I shall not want*”]

B: verses 2-3 [He provides peace and restoration]

**X: verse 4 [He provides comfort in the face of danger]**

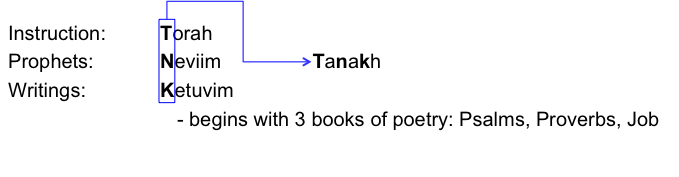
B: verse 5 [He provides blessings of peace, in spite of the enemies]

A: verse 6 [Assurance of YHWH’s presence and love, for all the days of his life]

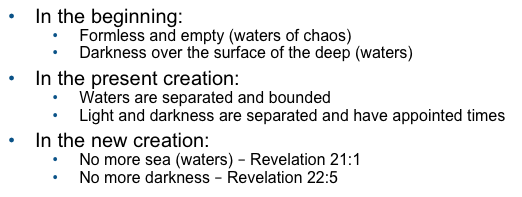
The table of a fellowship dinner with YHWH represents the same kind of peace (*shalom*) as that of sheep lying down in green pastures. The central issue and motive here, the threat posed by the valley, drives us to place our trust in the Good Shepherd.

Psalm 37 -- Peace in the Lord: This Psalm is an encouragement to not be anxious because of evil men, but to trust in YHWH. Our concern, and duty, is not to seek vengeance against our enemies, but rather to wait and trust in YHWH (37:7-9). See also Romans 12:19-21. Stated in a positive manner, our concern is to do good, to delight in the LORD, and commit our ways to Him (37:3-5). Furthermore, we need not be anxious about always knowing the right path. If we are honestly committed to the LORD, He will lead us in the right way (37:23-24).

Tanakh:



Waters and Darkness:



# Proverbs

This book presents sayings of wisdom, from sages: an ancient tradition of teaching that supplements the Torah and prophets (see Jeremiah 18:18). It is composed and structured to serve as systematic instruction for children and for future leaders, organized as below:

I. Praise of wisdom, from a father (1:8 – 9:18)

II. Proverbs of Solomon – instructions for youth (10:1-22:16)

III. Words of Wise Men (22:17 – 24:34)

IV. Hezekiah’s collection – leadership training (25:1-29:27)

V. Words of Agur (30:1-33)

VI. Words of King Lemuel (31:10-9)

VII. The Excellent Wife (31:10-31)

Basic definitions

Wisdom: skills for living, both social skills and for serving the Lord

Knowledge: Includes experiential knowledge as well as intellectual. It thus includes personal relational knowledge of God, and knowledge of life experience.

The “simple” or “naïve”: basically means open-minded, therefore uncommitted, morally adrift (1:32), and easily misled (14:15). It is normally expected for youth, but too often continues as a refusal to commit to higher values, meaning or purpose.

The “fool”: despises wisdom (1:7), refusing to listen. This attitude makes it difficult to instruct or train the fool (17:10; 18:2; 23:9; 26:4,5; 29:9).

The scoffer: disparages wisdom, and unable to receive instruction (9:7-8; 13:1; 15:12)

Fear the Lord: in humility, take the Lord seriously, listen respectfully and attentively, trust His promises and heed His warnings (3:5-8; 8:13; 14:2; 15:31-33; 28:14).

Purpose: The prologue (1:1-7) has a chiastic structure, with its center point in verse 4: “*to give prudence, …knowledge and discretion*”. This is supported by training to discern and understand such sayings (1:2,6). Verse 7 states the central theme that *“the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge”*, i.e. the first and controlling principle of knowledge*.* The pursuit of true knowledge must be faith-based: “faith seeking understanding”.

Wisdom calls, from the streets (social experience), from the market square (business and commerce), and from the gate (legal and political discourse) (1:20-33; 8:1-11; 9:3-6), and Wisdom is intrinsic to and hence manifested in the creation (3:19-20; 8:22-31). Wisdom has surpassing value (2:5-12,20-22; 3:13-18; 8:10-11,18-21,35-36), and we need it. First of all, take initiative to acquire it (2:2-4; 4:7; 23:22-23), then be diligent to keep it (3:1,3,21; 4:6; 7:1-4). Keep to the path of the righteous (4:11,18-19,26-27). Agur recognizes his human deficiency, and that our only source is God (30:2-6; compare Job 28:12-28). The fool’s way is what is right in his own eyes, but the wise seek counsel (12:15; 14:12; 16:25; 26:12).

Wisdom is based on two sources of knowledge: 1) our experiences of life, of history and nature 2) the special revelation of Torah (like the two sources of revelation in Psalm 19). For each source, correct interpretation requires more than human wisdom, it requires fear of the Lord and knowing God (3:5; 15:31-33). Since there is one God, our interpretations must seek for consistency and coherence of all knowledge from all sources. The wisdom writings demonstrate this approach. General and special revelation are to be mutually corrective, and to ignore either leads to error. Humanistic relativism despises special revelation, religious fundamentalism despises general revelation. Both of these paths despise the total counsel of wisdom.

It is worth noting two kinds of “wisdom”. First, there is the Godly wisdom of Proverbs, which includes the concerns of this life, but is subject to the higher standards and purposes of the Lord. It is often paired with righteousness (1:3; 2:9; 8:7-8,20; 9:9; 10:21; 11:30; 23:24), as a reminder that righteousness (the main theme of chapters 10-18) must take precedence over the concerns of this life (11:4; 15:16-17; 16:8,19; 17:1; 19:1,22; 22:1; 28:6). Secondly, there is a wisdom of this world that is alienated from God, and which leads to the life of a fool and a brute. This is being “wise in your own eyes” (3:7; 26:5,12; 28:11). Modern “self-help” literature is characterized by this kind of “wisdom”. James 3:13-18 contrasts this worldly wisdom to the wisdom from above.

Many of the proverbs contrast the righteous and the wicked, pointing out that their behavior is characteristic of their inner being, arising from the heart (4:18-19; 6:12-15; 10:11,20,32; 11:11; 12:5-6,10,12,26; 13:5; 15:28; 21:10; 26:24-26). This is equivalent to Jesus’ teaching that “*every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit … you will know them by their fruits*” (Matt 7:17,20).

Proverbs teaches that there are good and evil consequences to behavior: we reap what we sow (1:15-19, 31-32; 3:9-10; 5:22-23; 9:12; 10:2-5,16; 11:3,5-6,18-21; 12:3,7,13-14,21; 13:21; 14:3,11,14,32; 15:25,27; 17:13; 18:7; 19:3; 21:7; 22:8; 26:27; 28:10; 29:6,16). The promised consequences are not always seen in this life, but they have ultimate eternal fulfillment (2:21-22; 10:24-25; 12:28; 15:24; 23:17-18; 24:13-16,19-20). Under the new covenant, we can see this more clearly in the final judgment and the new creation.

Many of the proverbs are directed to the following applications:

* Family relations
  + Husband/wife: (5:3-23; 6:24-35; 7:6-27; 12:4; 14:1; 18:22; 19:13-14; 21:9,19; 25:24; 27:8,15-16; 31:10-31)
  + Children: (13:24; 19:18; 22:6,15; 23:13-14; 29:15,17)
* Wealth and work (3:9-10,27; 6:6-11; 10:4,5,15; 11:1, 24-26; 13:11; 14:23,31; 15:19; 16:11; 18:9; 19:15,17,24; 20:4,10,13,23; 21:6,13,17,20,25-26; 22:9, 13,16,22-23,28; 23:4-5,10-11; 24:27,30-34; 26:13-16; 27:18,23-27; 28:8,19-20,22,27; 29:7; 30:8-9)
* Government (8:15-16; 16:10-15; 24:11-12; 25:4-5; 28:3,15-16; 29:4,12,14)

Righteousness and faithfulness cannot be maintained among God’s people unless supported by healthy family life, community life, and government. Wisdom instruction therefore seeks to build up and preserve these institutions so they can continue to provide a positive, supportive environment for future generations. Even though our kingdom is not of this world, sound and righteous government is still important for the well-being of God’s children. As free citizens, responsible for our communities and our government, we must be politically engaged, as salt of the earth. The entire teachings of Proverbs, including those pertaining to the king and to rulers, are therefore fully applicable to Christians to this day.

# Job

A special theological issue for monotheism is how to explain evil when the one true God is both all-powerful and perfectly righteous. Scripture concedes that we must wait for the “day of the LORD” to see full justice. But why is this so? How can the promise of a future compensation really justify undeserved suffering in the present? Job is the book that directly confronts this issue. An outline of the book is below:

Narrative Introduction (1:1 – 2:13)

Poetic speeches (3:1 – 42:6)

Dialogue between Job and three friends (3:1 – 31:40)

Summary speech from Elihu (32:1 - 37:24)

Answer from the LORD (38:1 – 41:34)

Narrative Conclusion (42:7–17)

Job was a blameless and upright man, fearing God (1:1,8), and he enjoyed all the blessings that one could imagine. When the LORD asks Satan if he has considered Job, Satan, ever cynical, answers: *“Does Job fear God for nothing? … strike everything he has, and he will surely curse You…”* (1:9,11). Is Job’s righteousness solely self-serving?

So Job was put to the test. The LORD allowed Satan to take away all that Job has, and Job proved himself faithful (1:21-22). Satan nevertheless claimed that if the LORD were to “*touch his bone and his flesh; he will curse You to Your face.”* (2:5). So, in the next phase of testing, Job was afflicted with sore boils. Still, Job would not curse God (2:10).

But Job did raise up a cry of lament and complaint.

“*Why did I not perish at birth?”* (3:11)

“*Why is light given to those in misery, and life to the bitter of soul?”* (3:20)

This is the primary question that Job raises (See also 10:3). Why would the Creator make a creature destined for suffering? What purpose is served by this? Job had passed his test, but now God Himself is being put to a test.

In response (4:1 – 5:27), Eliphaz reprimands Job, saying he should not be impatient or dismayed (4:5). He should not “despise the discipline of the Almighty.” (5:17)

Job answers that he must voice his complaints (7:11; 10:1; 13:3,15), and that from his friends he needs kindness, rather than lectures (6:14; 13:4; 16:2; 19:2; 26:2). He then poses the second major question to God:

*“If I have sinned, what have I done to You…?”*

*“Why then do You not pardon my offenses…?”* (7:20,21)

Job knows of no sin, but insists that if he has, then the LORD should reveal it to him.

In chapter 8, Bildad objects to Job’s many words, and insists that God does not pervert justice. If Job were to honestly seek God, then God would surely restore him.

Job responds with another lament, despairing of justifying himself before God (9:2,19). He further concludes that righteousness itself is futile:

*“It is all the same; that is why I say, ‘He destroys both the blameless and the wicked.’”*

(9:22) *“Since I am already found guilty, why should I struggle in vain?”* (9:29)

In the following speeches, Job repeats these questions, and laments that there is no answer from God (19:7). Meanwhile, his friends increase the harshness of their attacks, accusing Job of sin, and of refusal to confess. In the midst of darkness and despair, however, Job voices a few rays of hope:

*“Though He slay me, yet will I hope in Him.”* (13:15)

*“Even now, my witness is in heaven;*

*My advocate is on high.”* (16: 19)

*“I know that my Redeemer lives,*

*And that in the end He will stand upon the earth.”* (19:25)

Elihu sums up the human answer to the dispute (32:1-37:24), basically restating the conventional wisdom of God’s perfect justice, and that therefore Job must be a sinner and he must confess.

In chapters 38 – 41, YHWH answers, by directing Job’s attention to two aspects of creation: 1) His wise and loving care over all creatures (38:1 - 39:30); and 2) His power to tame and ultimately defeat the powers of evil, represented by Behemoth and Leviathan (40:15 – 41:34). Leviathan is literally a crocodile, but is magnified here to the mythical dragon that represents all chaos and evil. It is the same as the chaos (waters) that was “tamed” during creation, and the chaos of the sea for which He has set boundaries that cannot be crossed (38:8-11). God is supreme over all evil: *“Who then is able to stand against Me?”* (41:10).

Job is only a small part of a much larger picture. His destiny is bound up with all of creation, and he must trust God to care for him, as He does for all creatures. He must trust that God has evil under control, and it will ultimately be defeated. Because of this, we can love and honor and worship Him, regardless of personal circumstances. There is no attempt at further explanation, which would be beyond human comprehension. What is revealed here is adequate to establish faith, trust and hope in the LORD. God has passed His test: He is indeed worthy of love and worship.

Job’s ordeal not only proved his character, but it also led him to a deeper knowledge of God, and a deeper trust. He did not receive a specific explanation for his personal sufferings, nor an answer to “why light is given to him who suffers?”, nor a full understanding of God’s master plan. But he did find reasons to love and to worship the LORD, reasons that do not depend upon personal blessings nor on an understanding of “justice”. He was thus raised to a more blessed level of relationship with God.

*“My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes”* (42:5-6).

# Song of Songs

The phrase “Song of songs”, in the title, indicates firstly the idea that this is the greatest of all songs. Secondly, it is a collection of songs, integrated into one song, like a medley. The phrase “of Solomon” is unlikely to indicate his authorship. It is more likely that the composer was a woman singer/song-writer employed in Solomon’s court. It may also be that some specifics in the song, such as her brothers and her country-girl background, are drawn from her own life experience.

The Song is lyric poetry, not dramatic or narrative. It is not meant to be a narrative with a chronological story-line. It is rather a collection of songs that present the many aspects of romantic love, various situations and phases in a relationship, the ebb and flow of intimacy. It presents a model of what such a relationship should be, and hence finds a place in wisdom literature as essential instruction on how to live.

The themes and message

The Song is first of all a celebration of passionate erotic love. It is affirmed as a part of what is “very good” in human nature. But it also teaches constraints and caution. This is in line with all Old Testament teachings about the goodness of creation, and that we are intended to enjoy life, passionately, and conversely expected to grieve and mourn tragic losses, passionately. This is opposed to most Eastern religions, Roman stoicism, and Christian traditions of asceticism, which teach detachment from earthly things. In accordance with this Old Testament view, Jesus enjoyed the good things of life, and was criticized by the religious establishment for having too much fun. Paul taught that deprivation and self-punishment are of no spiritual value (Col 2:23). The wisdom teachings of scripture (such as Ecclesiastes 2:24; 3:12-13; 5:18-20; 9:9; 11:9), as well as the laments in the Psalms and Lamentations, teach clearly that it is proper to enjoy and celebrate the good things of the world, and to grieve and lament their loss.

Another theme in the Song is that of exclusive mutual possession (“*My beloved is mine, and I am his*” 2:16; 6:3; 7:10), which is also taught by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:4-5. The woman asks her lover to “*Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal over your arm*” (8:6a). These statements in the Song uphold the ideal of life-long monogamy. See also 8:11,12 — exclusive monogamy is better than a king’s harem.

The husband/wife relationship is intended to reflect the relationship between God and His people. This principle is established in Genesis (created as male and female, in His image), and is taught by Paul in Ephesians 5:22-33. The prophets, especially Hosea, make this comparison, as well as the comparison between adultery and idolatry. There is an analogy between the passionate, exclusive love between husband and wife and the command to love YHWH with all your heart, soul and mind, and to have no other gods before Him. As His representatives, in His image, we should show this same exclusive and total commitment of love between husband and wife.

Other core teachings of the Song of Songs are:

1. The many examples of the lovers praising and complimenting each other (1:8-16; 4:1-7; 5:10-16; 6:4-9; 7:1-6). This should be seen as instruction on what is needed to develop and maintain a healthy relationship. Affection is to be verbalized, frequently.

2. The ideal and intention for marriage is not to be for economic convenience, or by family arrangement, but to be driven by passionate love, involving the whole person.

3. The repeated exhortation to the “daughters of Jerusalem”: “*Do not awaken love until it pleases*” (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). The likely meaning is that one should not seek sexual intimacy until ready to make the full commitment it demands. The primary application is a warning against pre-marital sexual intimacy. It is supposed to be for the full person, not just for the body. It may also mean that in any phase of relationship one should not raise expectations that he or she is unwilling to fulfill (a caution against casual flirting or teasing).

4. Song 8:6,7 — Love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave; it is an unquenchable fire. This is both a praise and a warning. Love overcomes all things, it never fails, and its passions are not to be taken lightly or casually. Compare Proverbs 6:27-35.

5. Song 8:10 — *“I am a wall…thus I have become in his eyes like one bringing contentment”*. This teaches the virtue and the value of pre-marital chastity. Her lover appreciates that she is a “locked garden” (4:12). It is the pre-condition for realizing the full potential joy and fulfillment of intimacy in marriage.

The Metaphors

The countryside, gardens, etc. represent the extraordinary “place” for intimate private union in love (4:8-5:1; 6:2; 7:11-12; 8:13). The city represents ordinary life, which interferes with and frustrates full intimacy. This kind of love transports a couple into a garden-like place that approaches the innocence and joy of the garden of Eden. The city is “east of Eden”. The country-girl, who knows and understands true love, gives instruction to the city girls (daughters of Jerusalem).

The man is described as a shepherd in 1:7, as part of the pastoral imagery. He is also called a gazelle (2:9,17; 8:14), indicating a sexuality that is both passionate and innocent. He is also referred to as a “king”, meaning that in the eyes of the woman, he is her king.

Most of the metaphors are not chosen for their close visual similarities but for the similarity in a few particular aspects, or of emotional effect or of valuation. This is the way to understand how her eyes are like doves (innocence), her teeth like a flock of sheep (white, and none missing), neck like the tower of David, breasts like fawns, etc. The woman’s body is a delightful “garden” or “vineyard” (4:12-15; 6:2-3; 8:12), and the man is an apple tree (1:3).

The woman calls herself “*a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys*” (2:1), which is humble and self-deprecating, saying she is an ordinary wild-flower. She is a country-girl, lacking the sophistication or supposed charms of city women. But the man sees her differently. To him, she is “*like a lily among thorns*” (2:2). Similarly, she is apologetic about her dark suntan (1:5-6), but he says she is most beautiful (1:6,15). She delights in his shade, as of an apple tree (2:3).

She says “*He has taken me to the banquet hall, and his banner over me is love*” (2:4). The “banner” is a flag of a military unit, which is planted to claim possession and to summon troops as a rallying point. This is saying that he claims her as his own, in the name of love.

Much of what is taught in the Song of Songs is summarized in the following:

“*Love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like a blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away.”* – Song of Songs 8:6b-7a)

# Ruth

The book of Ruth is widely regarded as the finest short story in all the world’s literature. It was written by an unknown author, probably during the early monarchy of Israel. The main themes are family love and loyalty, and the sovereign providence of God.

1:1-13 -- During the time of the Judges, Naomi, her husband, Elimelech, and her two sons were forced by famine to leave their home in Bethlehem and move to Moab. While living in Moab, Elimelech died, and her two sons married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. After ten years, the sons also died, leaving the three women as widows. Hearing that the famine was over, Naomi decides to return to her home in Bethlehem, but urges her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab, so that they can re-marry in their own country. From a practical, human perspective, this would seem to be the only hope available for Orpah and Ruth.

1:14-22 -- Orpah agrees, and remains in Moab, but Ruth clung to Naomi, declaring:

*“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.”* (1:16b-17a)

Ruth’s love for and loyalty to Naomi leads her to forsake her own country and the gods of her own land - to forsake hope of remarriage and a family - and to accept the people and the God of Naomi. This speaks not only of Ruth’s self-sacrificing loyalty, but also to what must have been a tremendous testimony of Naomi’s life and character, to have inspired and earned such loyalty.

When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred up, at the news of Naomi’s return. Because of her losses and afflictions, Naomi replies to them: “*Don’t call me Naomi* (which means pleasant, or sweet), *call me Mara* (which means bitter)” (1:20)

2:1-23 — Ruth asks permission of Naomi to go gleaning in the fields, “*behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor*”. The poor were allowed to go into the fields after a harvest and collect whatever grain was left behind. The law also prescribed that farmers should not go back and do their own gleaning, but should leave the remaining grain for the poor (Deuteronomy 24:19). To “find favor” would be to find a farmer that would permit this, and especially one who would allow the gleaner to follow closely behind the hired harvesters without interference.

When Ruth entered Boaz’s field, he particularly noticed her and asked about her (2:5). Bethlehem was a small town, and a stranger would stand out, especially a foreigner. It was probably also unusual for such a young woman to be in this situation (with neither a father nor husband or brothers to take care of her). When Boaz learns who she is, he encourages her to stay in his field, and instructs his servant to accommodate her. Since she has sought refuge in YHWH, Boaz accepts responsibilities as the agent and instrument of the YHWH.

3:1-18 — When the harvest time had come to an end, Naomi proposes to Ruth that she ask Boaz to be her redeemer - i.e. to buy back her land (Leviticus 25:25), and to marry Ruth, to raise up a son who would continue the family name (Deuteronomy 25:5-6). She considers this as a way to provide for Ruth’s future security. Her detailed instructions to Ruth, in 3:3-4, may be designed as a means of basing the marriage on genuine love, not just a legal levirate duty. She wants it to be a good and proper marriage, for Ruth’s sake.

In accordance with Naomi’s instructions, Ruth went to the threshing floor that night, where Boaz was sleeping. She uncovered his feet and lay down. This was a symbolic statement that she was making herself available to him for marriage. When he awoke, she made a more specific request that he “spread his garment over her”, which is a way of asking him to marry her. He rightly understood this to be a request for levirate marriage, including redemption of Naomi’s land, and he was more than willing to comply. He recognized this as a gracious act by Ruth, for Naomi’s sake, and commended her for it.

However, the right of redemption, which was a right of the kinsman to buy back land at its redemption price, was accorded to the nearest relative. Since there was one other closer relative, the offer had to first be made to him.

4:1-22 — The next morning, at the city gate, Boaz spoke of this to the other (nearest) relative. This other relative was willing to buy back the land, but he was unwilling to marry Ruth. Simply buying back the land at the redemption price could be a good deal, in that the land was supposedly worth that price, for the income it could produce. But the levirate marriage would entail extra expenses to support Ruth and the child that Ruth would bear, and the land would be inherited solely by that child. This would be a significant expense that could jeopardize the inheritance of his own children, which was a cost and risk he was unwilling to accept (4:6). Through the symbolic action of removing a sandal, he testified officially before the witnesses that he was relinquishing the right of redemption to Boaz.

It then followed that Boaz and Ruth were married, and she gave birth to a son, named Obed, who was regarded also as a son for Naomi. It is then noted that Obed became the father of Jesse, the father of David. These widows, Naomi and Ruth, who were impoverished and had very little hope when they returned from Moab, were in the end blessed beyond measure. God gave them a place of honor in the genealogy of David and the promised Messiah.

The book of Ruth teaches that tragedy and extreme hardship can be an opportunity and a special “spring-board” for great accomplishment and blessing. It is an opportunity that is fulfilled if one responds with humble and patient obedience. Ruth’s selfless devotion to Naomi, walking by faith, thus yielded far greater reward than the more “practical” response of Orpah.

We also learn from this story about the providence of God: how He is able to arrange circumstances and opportunities for those who are faithful to Him, and how God accomplishes this through his people (e.g. Boaz). The story of Ruth is a wonderful example of how *“in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.”*

# Lamentations

The book of Lamentations consists of five poems, corresponding to the five chapters, expressing the terrible grief and suffering of the destruction of Judah, Jerusalem, the temple, and the exile in Babylon. The author is not identified in the original text, but has traditionally been considered to be Jeremiah. Each of the five poems has 22 stanzas, and in the first four poems each stanza begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in alphabetic order.

Chapter 1 (1st poem): This poem is about Jerusalem, personified as a woman, representing all the people of Judah. In 1:1-9a, the narrator is speaking to the reader about her plight. She is lonely, like a widow, and demoted from a princess to a laborer. She weeps, with no one to comfort her (1:2,9); her former friends have become her enemies. The people are exiled, among the nations. The roads are deserted, the gates are desolate, the priests and virgins, who would normally be most favored, are severely afflicted. All of this is from the Lord, because of their sins (1:5,8). In addition to her afflictions, she is disgraced and despised as unclean (1:8,9a).

In 1:9b, the city cries out to God: *“Look, O Lord, on my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed”.* This is followed in 1:10-11a by an intercessory prayer from the narrator, and then another prayer from the city: *“Look, O Lord, and consider, for I am despised”* (1:11b). It is a prayer to persuade God that she has suffered enough.

In 1:12-19, the city speaks to those who pass by, pleading for sympathy. But the narrator observes that there is no comfort: *“Jerusalem has become an unclean thing among them”* (1:17).

The final section, 1:20-22, is a prayer from the city to the LORD, saying there is no help or comfort from anyone on earth. They have all become their enemies, so she asks the LORD to judge them also for their sins.

Chapter 2: In the second poem, the narrator describes how the LORD has afflicted the people of Israel, represented as the “Daughter of Zion”, or “Daughter of Jerusalem”. In 2:1-12, he is speaking to the reader. The first point is how God has removed His favor from Israel *“He has hurled down the splendor of Israel from heaven to earth; He has not remembered His footstool…”* (2:1). This clarifies the meaning of the prior parallel of God covering them by the cloud of His anger. After describing the ensuing destruction, he laments: *“My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within, my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed…”* (2:11).

In 2:13-19, the narrator is speaking to the Daughter of Jerusalem. He is at a loss as to how to admonish or comfort them. So he tells them to cry out to the LORD: *“pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord”* (2:19). He then intercedes in prayer for them in 2:20-22, pleading that they have surely suffered enough, or more than enough.

In chapter 3, the third poem, the narrator is a man who personally experiences the tragedy of Judah’s destruction and exile. He remembers his past afflictions, and he therefore now has hope (3:20-24) *“The LORD is my portion, therefore I will wait for him”* (3:24). He then offers encouragement and counsel: *“For men are not cast off by the LORD forever, though He brings grief, He will show compassion, so great is His unfailing love”* (3:31-32); *“Let us examine and probe our ways, and let us return to the LORD”* (3:40). This is then followed by prayer to the LORD seeking relief for his people (3:56), and justice against their enemies (3:64-66).

Chapter 4:1-11 recounts their terrible suffering, especially of starvation in Jerusalem during the siege (4:9-10). The next section (4:12-20) explains it as the LORD handing them over to their enemies, because of their sins, especially of the prophets and priests (4:13). They sought help, but there was none (4:17). This poem concludes with a curse against Edom, representative of their enemies, saying that *“to you also the cup will be passed….He will punish your sin and expose your wickedness”* (4:21-22).

Chapter 5 is a prayer to the LORD: *“Remember, O LORD, what has happened to us; look, and see our disgrace”.* Verses 2-18 state the situation, covering the same themes as the previous chapters: oppression by foreign enemies, who have taken all their possessions, extreme poverty and hunger, all joy has ceased, and Mt. Zion is desolate. Their only hope is in the LORD, for He reigns forever (5:19). The usual question of a lament is raised: *“Why do you forsake us so long?”,* andthis is followed by the supplication: *“Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may return; renew our days as of old, unless You have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure”* (5:21-22). This final questioning of whether the LORD will ultimately fulfill His promises of restoration may be an honest expression of doubt, or it may be a means of reminding the LORD of His promises. Either way, it is an example of how prayer should humbly admit our lack of knowledge of His will, and not be overly bold in making presumptuous demands. The prayer of faith, in the end, is a prayer of humble submission to whatever may be His will.

In this book of Lamentations, it is acknowledged that their suffering is from God, and that it is just payment for their sins. But the rationale for the lament is to give voice to the suffering, so that God might see that it is enough, that He might conclude that they have paid sufficiently for their sins. It is a rationale based on the assumption that the purpose of the judgment was not for utter destruction, but rather for discipline and purification, to create a faithful remnant. This confidence in God’s character was expressed in 3:22-33, and its location in the center of the book may well indicate it is intended as the central teaching: to not despair, but to persevere in seeking the LORD [1].

As it was for Job, the most dreadful aspect of their suffering was the broken relationship with the LORD -- the experience of being forsaken [2]. It is an experience of God’s silence and of spiritual darkness. We must conclude that this silence and darkness, as a part of the discipline, contributes to spiritual development. Just as faith develops as we creatively struggle against all forms of evil, we are also driven to meditate more deeply when confronted by darkness. In this way we acquire a deeper knowledge and understanding, which becomes our own. Such knowledge and understanding are reserved for those who passionately seek and search, those who are committed to integrity, for those who fear the LORD. Just as it was for Job, the remnant of Israel learned and became stronger due to both the physical sufferings of this world and the spiritual suffering of feeling like they had been abandoned by their God.

Notes on Lamentations:

[1] But those who are rebellious against the LORD, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, who love the darkness, are handed over to blindness and darkness (consider Isaiah 6:9-10). As with chaos, God manages it and uses it, and has set boundaries for it. It serves the process of testing and purging, both individually and corporately. And the purging, for sanctification, is in fact proleptic judgment, putting to death the old self.

[2] The special kind of suffering expressed in lament is the suffering of a rejected lover. The one who laments truly loves the LORD, and so endures the emotional pain of being abandoned and betrayed by the one you love.

# Ecclesiastes

These are the words of Qohelet, the Teacher (one who calls and presides over an assembly). This was either Solomon, or one who wrote in the name of Solomon. Written in the tradition of “pessimism” literature, Ecclesiastes tackles the ultimate question of the meaning of life. The book asserts that wisdom cannot in itself provide the ultimate answers, it rather points to faith in God to find joy and meaning.

Eccles 1 - All is vanity - a mere vapor, which quickly dissipates. All human effort is worthless, under the sun. From this perspective, nothing is lasting, nothing is gained. As Jesus said: “*What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?*” (Matt 16:26). The world remains the same, continuing it’s monotonous cycles; we cannot change anything; nothing is ever new “under the sun” [1]. The Teacher sought to understand life by wisdom, but he could not make sense of it (the crooked could not be straightened). His “striving after wind” only resulted in grief and pain (1:18). This task is a curse from God (Gen 3:17-19), Who subjected all things to futility (Rom 8:18-25).

Eccles 2 – The Teacher then considers pleasure, but he finds that it too is vanity. Laughter (e.g. humor, play, and escapist entertainment) is “madness”, i.e. a temporary escape from reality [2]. Neither does genuine pleasure accomplish anything, for it has no lasting value. Similarly for works and riches. They are all vanity and striving after wind. Wisdom is better than folly, but they both have the same end: death, with no remembrance. Therefore “*a man can do* *nothing better than to eat and drink, and find satisfaction in his work*” (2:24). To “eat and drink” represents a contented life, regardless of your situation (Phil 4:11-12; 1 Timothy 6:6-10) [3]. When we enjoy life, it is a gift from God (Eccles 2:24; 3:13; 5:19), which glorifies Him (Psalm 104; 1 Timothy 4:4-5).

Eccles 3 – The Teacher presents several opposing pairs of life situations, and says that each has an appointed time. Everything is under the sovereignty of God. This is beyond the comprehension of human wisdom, but must be accepted by faith. He has also set eternity in our hearts (3:11), such that we yearn for enduring meaningfulness [4], but He has not given us the capacity to discover that meaning, or to know how things work together to accomplish His purpose (see also Eccles 8:17) [5]. Whatever man does cannot change the eternal destiny ordained by God (3:14-15). Plans are made by men, but God determines the outcome (Prov 16:1-3, 9; 19:21). Fear of the Lord keeps us from arrogantly trying to create meaning, teaching us to humbly accept the limitations of wisdom (Eccles 1:17-18; 8:17; Job 28:12-28), so that we must turn to Him in faith. Regarding wickedness in the world, the answer, by faith, is that there will be a time when God will judge. He is the final Judge, not us (Eccles 3:16-17).

Eccles 4 — The Teacher sees the oppressed, with no one to comfort, and concludes that the dead are better off, and better still are those who never existed. He complains that all labor is the result of envy, which is vanity and chasing after the wind. Competitive striving is driven by envy and covetousness (see James 3:13-16). The other extreme is the idleness of foolishness, which is self-destructive. The right course is “*one handful with tranquility*” (4:6) (see also Psalm 37:1-11; 46:10). He then observes the vanity of a person who labors without ceasing, but with no one to receive the fruit of his labor. He also affirms the value of friendship and community (“two are better than one”). He then comments on the never-ending cycle of rulers that come and go, which also is vanity and chasing the wind.

Eccles 5 — The Teacher’s counsel regarding worship is to guard your steps before God; listen, and let your words be few. Too many words produce nonsense (voice of a fool), just as too many cares result in the nonsense of dreams (5:3,7); this is contrasted to the “fear of God”. Be careful about making vows, and be diligent to pay them (e.g. marriage, child dedication, baptism, offices of leadership). He then observes that he who loves money, will not be satisfied with it; it only brings problems and anxieties (5:10-12). To live a miserable life chasing after money brings no benefit; it is a grievous evil.

Eccles 6 — If a man has wealth and honor, but is not empowered by God to enjoy it, this too is vanity (compare 5:19). If a man has a long life and many children, but his soul is not satisfied, then “*a stillborn child is better off than he*”. It is all futility.

Eccles 7 — “*A good name is better than fine perfume*” is the theme for 7:1-14. Inner character is more important than physical pleasures or external appearances. Generally, those things that seem unpleasant are the very things that strengthen character, thus resulting in lasting fulfillment and joy. And so funerals are better than birthday parties, the house of mourning is better than a house of feasting, wise rebuke (e.g. Nathan to David in 2 Samuel 12:1-15) is better than laughter, the end of a matter is better than its beginning [6]. According to faith, the best days are not in the past, but in the future (7:10). God has made both the day of adversity and the day of prosperity (7:14), so accept each in its time (3:11). Do not be over-righteous, nor over-wicked (7:16-17). That is to say, you should pursue neither a self-righteous legalism, nor abandonment to sin, neither asceticism nor indulgence, but rather avoid both: walk humbly with God, by faith (compare Romans 6:1,15). He says that wisdom is elusive, and cautions against placing trust in others. “*God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes*” (7:29).

Eccles 8,9 —One should not defy or rebel against rulers. We have neither the ability nor the wisdom to fix all the injustices of the world; we must leave it to God. We are all in God’s hands, and we cannot know whether good or evil awaits us. The only thing that is certain is that we all die. Our days are all the more precious because they are numbered, so we should embrace a life of joy, and work with all our might.

Eccles 10, 11 —The Teacher observes that “as *dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor*”. The chapter then continues with several proverbs about foolishness: specific examples of how wisdom exceeds folly, but with the observation that “under the sun”, folly often prevails. He then counsels to “*cast your bread upon the waters*…”, which is to say that we must make commitments involving risk. We must not be paralyzed by fear, but trust in the providence of our Creator. Rejoice while it is light, because darkness is coming; rejoice during youth, for it is fleeting (11:7-10).

Eccles 12 — Remember your Creator - live life by faith, with wisdom - before the progressive afflictions and disabilities of old age (12:1-5), and the day of death (12:6-7) [7]. The editor says that the Teacher carefully chose his words to be effective as exhortation (like goads) and to become firmly fixed in memory (like well-driven nails). He also warns against excessive study and endless books. The conclusion: “*fear God and keep His commandments*”, and remember that “*God will bring every deed into judgment*”.

Summarizing the main points:

1. The Teacher is committed to wisdom, which is always better than folly.
2. Applying wisdom to all that is seen, under the sun, he declares that all is vanity.
3. The answer is to live by faith: cease striving, and enjoy life as a gift from God.

Notes on Ecclesiastes

[1] The phrase “under the sun” indicates a perspective that is limited to the created, earthly realm. It pertains to what can be known through the physical senses, i.e. empirical knowledge, without access to the “heavenly” realm, i.e. revelation from God. An excellent example of modern pessimism “under the sun” is the following quote from Bertrand Russell:

*“All the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and the whole temple of Man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the débris of a universe in ruins.”*

[2] Laughter is “madness”, in that it is an attempted escape from reality. As a brief respite, it is therapeutic, but in excess, as a way of life, it is fundamentally immoral in that it amounts to a willful denial of truth and refusal to face and deal with reality. Consider the movie “The Matrix”, which presents the moral imperative to choose a life of painful and difficult reality, rather than the much easier path of delightful delusion.

[3] The well-known verse of encouragement, *“I can do all things through Him who strengthens me”* (Philippians 4:13), should be understood within the context of finding contentment. Oftentimes the greatest challenges and difficulties in life, where we must rely on His strength, do not pertain to great works of accomplishment, but rather to quiet and joyful perseverance under unpleasant circumstances: the art of contentment.

[4] This belief that what is fully real and meaningful must have permanence and stability, as opposed to the fleeting temporality of things in this world, is also a fundamental conviction of Greek Platonic philosophy.

[5] The limitations of human wisdom (under the sun) has actually been mathematically proven in Kurt Goedel’s Incompleteness Theorems. A simplified statement of these theorems are:

*In any consistent system, there are true statements that cannot be proven*

*It is not possible to prove the consistency of a system, within that system*

The theological consequences are

1. God can be known, but cannot be proven

2. The universe, and life, might truly be meaningful, but this could never be proven

3. Meaning must come from outside the created universe (i.e. by revelation)

[6] To live under the full awareness of death, acknowledging that death is certain and that it may be near, gives life a greater sense of meaningfulness and intensity (see also Eccles 9:3-10). It leads us to a greater appreciation and enjoyment of all the good things of life, in the present. This theme of finding joy in the present because of the shortness and uncertainty of life is one of the messages quite effectively dramatized in the movie “Mrs. Miniver”.

[7] This is the teaching of Ephesians 5:15-16 -- *Be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil.”*

# Esther

Esther concerns events in the time period of 483-473 BC, under the Persian empire. It gives the background for the feast of “Purim”, which celebrates the deliverance of the Jewish people from what would have been a total genocide. The enduring teaching of this book is the providence of God, to fulfill His covenant and accomplish His purpose.

Esther 1:1-8 -- The king of the Persian empire was “Ahasuerus”, which is the Hebrew transliteration of his Persian name. The corresponding Greek name is “Xerxes”. This immense empire extended from Pakistan to Sudan, including all the regions where the Jewish people had moved to during their exile. The events here take place in Susa, the location of the winter palace. A great banquet, or series of banquets, is described, which was probably a “war council” where the king was rallying support for an invasion of Greece. He was assuring the nobles and princes that he had the resources to succeed, and to reward those who supported him. Herodotus records this appeal by Xerxes: *“For this cause I have now summoned you together, that I may impart to you my purpose. It is my intent to bridge the Hellespont and lead my army through Europe to Greece, that I may punish the Athenians for what they have done to the Persians and to my father.”* This was followed by a 7-day banquet for his people in Susa. Drinking was an important element of these banquets, as the Persians required drunkenness as part of their official planning process. It supposedly gave them access to divine inspiration.

When Esther was written, many years later, the original readers would have known about this military venture, the famous Greek battles of Thermopylae and Salamis, where the Persians were turned back in humiliating defeat, with tremendous casualties. This would strike them as ironic humor, ridiculing the grandiose ambitions and arrogance of Xerxes. This is in the spirit of Psalm 2: *“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together…. The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.”* - Psalm 2:1,2,4

Esther 1:9-22 -- Xerxes summoned the Queen, Vashti, for display at this banquet, but she refused. This was an embarrassing insult, which outraged the king. Taking the advise of his counselors, he permanently banished Vashti from his presence, and sent an edict to all the provinces, that wives be obedient to their husbands. This too is somewhat comical. It ensures that everyone throughout the empire would know about this embarrassing incident. Also, it is foolishness to try to command respect by a decree. Xerxes is being depicted as an incompetent fool, manipulated by his advisors.

Esther 2:1-21 -- To replace Vashti, the king ordered that young virgins be taken from all the provinces into his harem, from whom he would select a new queen. In Susa, there was a Jew named Mordecai, who was the guardian of his cousin, Esther. She was one of the girls that was taken into the harem. It is noted that Mordecai was from the tribe of Benjamin, great grandson of Kish (2:5). This links him with King Saul, of Benjamin, son of Kish. When Esther went in to the king, he selected her as the new queen (2:17).

Esther 3:1-15 -- The king promoted Haman to a position of second-in-command in the empire, and decreed that everyone must bow down and give him homage. He was an “Agagite”, derived from Agag, former king of the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15:1-7), who were long-standing enemies of Israel. Saul fought against and defeated the Amalekites, but was reprimanded by Samuel for not killing Agag. Mordecai therefore refused to bow down to him, and this enraged Haman. So Haman convinced the king that the Jews were a rebellious people, who must be destroyed. The king consented, and authorized Haman to issue an edict *“to destroy, to kill and to annihilate all the Jews”* (3:13).

Esther 4:1-17 -- Mordecai asked Esther to go to the king and plead for the people. She objects, because anyone who approaches the king without being summoned would be put to death, if the king did not extend his scepter of mercy. Mordecai’s response was *“Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews can escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?”* (4:13,14). This is a thinly veiled threat, as well as an appeal to duty. Esther then agrees: *“if I perish, I perish.”* (4:16).

Esther 5:1-14 -- After three days of fasting, she went in to see King Xerxes. He extended the scepter, and she requested that he and Haman attend a banquet that she had prepared. At that banquet, when asked what her request was, she again asked them to both return the next day for another banquet. That evening, Haman complained to his wife about Mordecai, and she proposed that he build a gallows and ask the king to hang Mordecai on it. This pleased him, so he had the gallows made (5:14).

Esther 6:1-14 -- That night, the king could not sleep, so he had the “chronicles” brought in to be read to him. He discovered there that Mordecai had saved the king’s life by disclosing an assassination plot, but that nothing had been done to reward him for this great service. The next morning, Haman arrives to request the execution of Mordecai; but the king instead asks him what should be done for someone whom the king wishes to honor. Haman imagines the king is talking about himself, and therefore recommends that the person be honored by being attired in the king’s robe and paraded through the streets on the king’s horse. The king then orders Haman to do this for Mordecai.

Esther 7:1-10 -- During the second banquet, Esther makes her request to the king: to save her life and the life of her people. When asked who it is that wishes to kill them, she says *“The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman!”*. Haman pleads for mercy, but to no avail. The king orders that he be hanged on the same gallows that Haman had made for Mordecai. [*“If a man digs a pit, he will fall into it”* – Proverbs 26:27]

Esther 8:1-17 -- The king then gave the estate of Haman to Mordecai, and promoted him to the position that Haman had held. The king could not revoke his previous edict against the Jews, but he authorized Esther to issue a new edict in his name, which authorized the Jews to defend themselves against anyone who would attack them.

Esther 9:1-10:3 -- On the 12th month, on the day that the Jews were supposed to have been annihilated, *“the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them.”* (9:1). Mordecai then sent out letters, instituting a feast to be held on the 12th month, annually, to celebrate this deliverance.

The central turning point in the book is at 6:1, where the king has insomnia, and asks that the chronicles be read to him. There follows a complete reversal of fortune, for Mordecai, for the Jews, and for Haman. The course of history turns upon what appears to be an insignificant “chance” event (Eccles 9:11). What this actually means is that the rulers of this world do not determine the course of history, but it is the work of God. Furthermore, it is usually not by dramatic miracles, but rather by His providence, working through ordinary events. *“In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps”* - Proverbs 16:9.

# Daniel

The events in Daniel occur from 605 BC to 537 BC, among the exiles in Babylon. Chapters 1-6 are a narrative, and chapters 7-12 are prophetic visions. The latter section is “apocalyptic”, characterized by symbolic language, foretelling future world history, and emphasizing God’s sovereignty and final triumph. The narratives give examples of how to live under an ungodly regime and culture; the apocalyptic visions provide insight and encouragement for times of oppression and persecution [1].

Daniel 1:1-21 -- When Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, assaulted Jerusalem, he captured Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego to serve in his court. They were given instruction in the language and literature of the Chaldeans, but Daniel refused the king’s food, insisting they only eat vegetables. This is an example of compliant service where possible, yet maintaining a clean conscience before God (see 1 Corinthians 8:4-13) [2].

Daniel 2:1-49 -- King Nebuchadnezzar was troubled by a dream, which he could not remember. Dreams were regarded as messages from the gods, and it was the particular duty of a king to be the channel for such messages. So it was quite disturbing that he couldn’t remember it. He asked his wise men to recall it for him, but they were unable - only a god could reveal a dream that has been forgotten (2:10-11). Daniel, however, received revelation from God as to both the content and the meaning of the dream. It was a vision of a great statue representing four successive kingdoms: it had a head of gold (representing Babylon), breast and arms of silver (Medo-Persia), torso and thighs of bronze (Greece), and legs of iron, with feet of iron and clay (Rome). These 4 kingdoms have declining splendor, but increasing strength. The final European phase will be several kingdoms that share the Roman heritage, but without political union. A stone, cut without human hands, struck the statue on its feet, and the entire statue was destroyed (see Luke 20:17-18). That is the kingdom of God, which will crush all the kingdoms of the world, and will become an everlasting kingdom [3].

Daniel 3:1-30 -- Nebuchadnezzar built a huge golden image and commanded everyone to bow down and worship it when they hear the musical signals. Anyone who refused would be cast into a furnace of fire. Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego refused, saying: *“God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire…but even if He does not, … we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”* (3:17-18). After being cast into the furnace, the king saw that they were walking around unharmed, with a 4th one who looked like a son of the gods. Nebuchadnezzar released them, and decreed that no one shall speak anything against their God.

Daniel 4:1-37 -- Nebuchadnezzar has another dream: an angel ordered that a great tree be chopped down and a band of iron and bronze wrapped around the stump, and that his mind is to be changed from that of a man to a beast. Daniel interprets it as applying to Nebuchadnezzar, who would be stricken by madness and behave as a wild animal for seven years. One year later, a voice from heaven said to him *“sovereignty has been removed from you, and you will be driven away from mankind”* (4:31-32). Hence it was fulfilled. After seven years, he was restored, and he confessed and honored the God of Heaven.

Daniel 5:1-31 -- Many years later, the last ruler of Babylon, Belshazzar, held a great feast for his nobles. While drinking from the sacred vessels, he suddenly saw the fingers of a hand writing on the wall: “Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin”. He was terrified by this, and his counselors could not interpret the meaning. Daniel was brought in, and he interpreted it as follows: *“Mene - God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it; Tekel - you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient; Upharsin - your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians”*. That same night the Persians invaded, Belshazzar was killed, and Darius the Mede received the kingdom.

Daniel 6:1-28 -- Darius’ prefects convinced him to forbid prayer to any god but himself, for 30 days. They then brought charges against Daniel, for praying to his God, and Darius was thus compelled to cast Daniel into a lion’s den. The next morning, Darius discovered that Daniel was unharmed, and decreed that all should fear the God of Daniel.

Daniel 7:1-28 -- This is the first of the apocalyptic visions of Daniel. Four great beasts rose up from the sea: a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a terrifying beast with 10 horns. After this, he saw the Ancient of Days seated on a throne, and the 4th beast was destroyed. Then he saw one like a Son of Man who came to the Ancient of Days, and He was given dominion over an everlasting kingdom [4]. The interpretation is that the beasts are 4 successive kingdoms (Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome), and the everlasting kingdom will be given to the saints of the Highest One. The 10 horns of the 4th beast are 10 future kingdoms (European kingdoms that succeed the Roman empire [5]). There is another little horn that wages war against the saints (probably the “man of lawlessness” of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12), for which the most fitting application is the Roman Catholic papacy [6].

Daniel 8:1-27 -- Two years later, Daniel has a vision of a ram (Media/Persia) being destroyed by a goat (Greece), whose horn is Alexander the Great. He is then succeeded by four others; and then a little horn arises, Antiochus IV, an infamous enemy of the Jews.

Daniel 9:1-27 -- Daniel recalls that Jeremiah had prophesied that the nations would serve Babylon 70 years (Jer 25:11), and concluded that the time had arrived. He therefore offered a prayer of confession and intercession, and the angel Gabriel appeared to him to answer the prayer. He said the command was given to rebuild Jerusalem, and that 70 weeks are decreed to accomplish the following: 1) finish the transgression, 2) make an end of sin, 3) make atonement for iniquity, 4) bring in everlasting righteousness, 5) seal up vision and prophecy, and 6) anoint the most holy place. The Christian interpretation is that all this has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, but continues to be implemented on earth in the church. After 7 weeks, the city would be rebuilt, and after another 62 weeks, the Messiah would be “cut off”, i.e. sacrificed. In the 70th week, a “prince” will bring destruction and desolation, subjugating God’s people by force; but in the middle of the week he will be destroyed. This final week is the entire church age, culminating in Christ’s second coming.

Daniel 10:1-12:13 -- These visions are of conflicts between the Seleucid and Ptolemaic kings, and of Antiochus IV, who will *“desecrate the sanctuary, …and set up the abomination of desolation”* (11:31). Jesus applied this also to the later destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (Matt 24:15-16), indicating that these prophecies have multiple applications. There will be times of great distress, but God’s people will be rescued (12:1), and in the end, there is the resurrection: *“Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt”* (12:2).

When asked how long until the end, the angel answers: *“for a time, times, and half a time”* (12:7). This is the symbolic expression for a time period of oppression (Dan 7:25; Rev 11:2; 12:6,14; 13:5). It is the half-week of Daniel 9:27. The beastly powers of this world are permitted to reach a peak intensity, but are then cut off and destroyed, and justice and salvation will be rendered at the resurrection.

Notes on Daniel:

[1] The central portion, 2:4b-7:28, is in Aramaic, the international language, indicating it is especially for readers of all nations. The framing sections, 1:1-2:4a, 8:1-12:13, are in Hebrew, intended especially for the Jews. The Aramaic section has a Chiastic structure, as below:

* Chap 2 – Vision of Statue, representing 4 kingdoms
  + Chap 3 – Deliverance from the fiery furnace
    - Chap 4 – Nebuchadnezzar stricken by insanity
    - Chap 5 – Belshazzar’s kingdom handed over to Persia
  + Chap 6 - Deliverance from the lion’s den
* Chap 7 - Vision of Beasts from the sea, representing 4 kingdoms

[2] The book of Daniel provides excellent examples of God’s people setting boundaries for the influence of an ungodly culture upon their lives. This corresponds to God Himself setting boundaries to how far He will allow the kingdoms of the world to pursue evil: He permits evil to go it’s course, using it for His purposes, but then says “no further”, and executes judgment. We, too, generally comply with established authorities, but at some point must say “no further, we resist”. As expressed in Ecclesiastes, there is an appointed time for every purpose (Ecclesiastes 3:1,11).

[3] The statement that all the kingdoms were crushed “at the same time” (Daniel 2:35) suggests that these sequential kingdoms are also types that are fulfilled repeatedly in many future kingdoms.

[4] The Son of Man is in the image of God, what man is intended to be, in contrast to the beasts that sinful mankind had become.

[5] It has been proposed that these 10 European kingdoms that succeeded Rome, about 476 AD, were: Franks, Alamani, Visigoths, Suebi, Anglo-Saxons, Lombards, Burgundians, Ostrogoths, Heruli, and Vandals. It may be, however, that “10” is a symbolic number, never intended to correspond precisely to 10 kingdoms.

[6] The symbolism of apocalyptic literature lends itself to multiple historical realizations. For example, some historical realizations of the archetypal Anti-Christ are: Antiochus IV, the Roman general Titus, the Roman emperor Domitian, Pope Leo, Napoleon and Hitler.



# Ezra and Nehemiah

Ezra and Nehemiah were combined in one book in the Hebrew Scriptures. They tell of events among the restored remnant in Judah under the leadership of Ezra (scribe) and Nehemiah (governor). They had arrived in Jerusalem about 80 years after the first settlement of exiles, at a time when there had been considerable spiritual decay, as had been noted earlier by the prophet Malachi. Ezra and Nehemiah succeeded in reviving the community and establishing a firm foundation for the continuation of the Jewish nation.

It was critical to God’s purpose that this remnant be holy, preserving their identity as God’s own people, distinct from the surrounding nations: *“Thus you are to be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy; and I have set you apart from the peoples to be Mine.”* – Leviticus 20:26. Key elements for establishing and preserving their holy identity were 1) rebuilding the temple, 2) rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, 3) instruction in the Torah, 4) faithful cultic observances (sacrifices, offerings, feasts, Sabbath keeping), 5) social and economic justice, and 6) avoiding intermarriage with outsiders. There is also careful attention given to genealogies and identification and enumeration of family clans (Ezra 2:1-60; 7:1-5; 8:1-14; Nehemiah 7:6-65; 11:3-12:26).

The text of Ezra and Nehemiah does not follow a strictly chronological order. The table below is a timeline of this period, giving a time-ordered sequence of the narratives [1].

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Date | Persian Ruler | Date | Events |
| 539-530 | Cyrus | 538 | First group of exiles return (Ezra 1:1-3:7) |
| 537-536 | Temple rebuilding begun and then halted (Ezra 3:8-4:5,24) |
| 530-522 | Cambyses |  |  |
| 521-486 | Darius I | 520 | Temple rebuilding resumed, in the times of Haggai, Zechariah, Zerubbabel and Jeshua (Ezra 5:1-6:12) |
| 516 | Temple completed (Ezra 6:13-22) |
| 486-464 | Xerxes (Ahasuerus) | 486 | An accusation and decree to stop building the wall (Ezra 4:6) |
| 464-423 | Artaxerxes I |  | Moral decay and unacceptable worship (Malachi) |
| 458 | Ezra goes to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:1-8:36)  Issue of mixed marriages (Ezra 9) |
| Pre-445 | Fortification of Jerusalem stopped (Ezra 4:7-23) |
| 445 | Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:1-2:20)  Rebuilding the walls & covenant renewal (Nehemiah 3:1-13:5) |
| 433 | Nehemiah returns to Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 13:6) |
| Post-433 | Nehemiah comes back to Jerusalem & institutes several reforms (Nehemiah 13:7-31) |

Ezra 1-6 -- This section covers events from 538-516, regarding the first return of exiles, and the rebuilding of the temple. This parallels the narratives in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23, Haggai and Zechariah 1-7. The foundations for the temple were laid (Ezra 3:10), but then their enemies in the land forced them to stop (4:4-6,24). Then, under Darius (about 15 years later), they resumed the temple rebuilding, with the encouragement of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (5:1-2) and official support from the king (6:6-12), and it was completed in 516 BC (6:13-18).

Ezra 7-8 -- About 58 years later, Ezra, a scribe and a priest descended from Eleazar, was commissioned by King Artaxerxes to go to Jerusalem to teach the Law of God, and to appoint officials who would execute and enforce the Law (7:25). This was something Ezra had long been preparing and planning for: *“Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach his statutes and ordinances in Israel”* (7:10), and he was now strengthened by “the hand of the LORD” to carry it out (7:28). Starting at 7:27, the narrative switches from a 3rd person account to a 1st person account by Ezra. He enumerates the people who accompanied him, and notes that he made sure there would be sufficient Levites to perform the temple cultic functions. Since they were taking a tremendous wealth of gold (3,000 kg) and silver (22,000 kg), there was great risk of ambush from bandits. Having confessed that the LORD was with them, he refused armed escort from the king, relying solely on the LORD for protection (8:21-23).

Ezra 9-10 -- Ezra was informed by the “princes” that many of the people, including priests and Levites, had intermingled with the peoples of the land, taking their daughters as wives. This greatly disturbed Ezra, as it violated the law (Exodus 34:11-16; Deut. 7:3-4). He tore his garments, and offered a prayer of intercessory confession (9:5-15). The people assembled and joined him in weeping, and proposed that they make a covenant to put away all the foreign wives [2]. So Ezra made them take this oath, and all the divorces were completed during the next 3 months. They were thus cleansed of the kind of influence that had led to the previous downfall of the nation.

Nehemiah 1-4 -- Nehemiah, who served as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, received word that the remnant in Judah were in great distress and the wall of Jerusalem was broken down (1:3). He therefore mourned, fasted and prayed before the LORD on their behalf, praying to receive compassion before the king in this matter. The king then granted his request to go and rebuild the city walls (2:4-8). When he arrived, he inspected the walls, and then elicited support from the Jewish officials to proceed with the project. Their enemies, Sanballat of Samaria and Tobiah the Ammonite, conspired to fight against the city, to stop the work. But Nehemiah heard of the plan, and armed the builders and stationed guards at exposed areas, and they successfully completed the work. It is an example of reliance on the LORD, in prayer, combined with prudent initiative: *“We prayed to our God, and…we set up a guard against them day and night”* (4:9) [3].

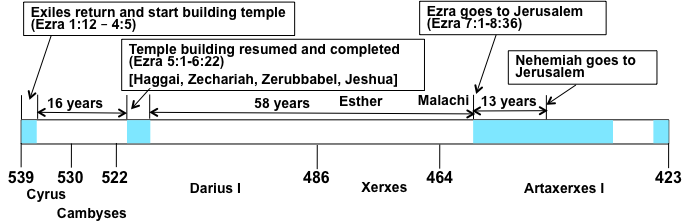
Nehemiah 5 -- Because of famine, many of the Jews had to mortgage their land, paying excessive interest, and were in danger of becoming enslaved to their brothers. Nehemiah called the money-lenders to account, and made them pledge to return the lands and the interest they had collected.

Nehemiah 6 -- Sanballat threatened to send a letter to the king, accusing the Jews of rebellion; and Sanballat and Tobiah tried to trick Nehemiah into entering the temple for protection, so they could have cause for an evil report against him. Neither of these plots succeeded.

Nehemiah 7-13 -- A census is taken (chapter 7), and in 7th month, all the people assembled at Jerusalem for a holy convocation (Lev 23:24) to hear Ezra reading from the Torah. It was a turning-point for the nation, to see such acceptance and enthusiasm for God’s word. They later celebrated the feast of booths, and followed this with a day of fasting. The leaders all signed an oath to observe the law, and to make the required contributions for the temple and the priests. Nehemiah then returned to king Artaxerxes. When he later came back to Jerusalem, he restored the tithes for the Levites, restored and enforced Sabbath observance, and enforced prohibitions against mixed marriages. In summary, the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah worked together, by instruction and enforcement, to institute the reforms that would secure an enduring tradition of holiness for God’s people.

Notes on Ezra and Nehemiah:

[1] Below is a graphical timeline for the events of Ezra/Nehemiah.



[2] In Ezra 10:1-4 we see the immediate answer to Ezra’s prayer of 9:5-15. The people come to him and give him their full support and encouragement. Note especially that they exhort him to provide the needed leadership: *“Arise! For this matter is your responsibility, but we will be with you; be courageous and act.”* – Ezra 10:4. Prayers are answered, and God’s work is accomplished, when the people support their leaders, and when the leaders respond by fulfilling their responsibilities.

[3] One could summarize the instruction from this example as: “pray hard and work hard”.

# Chronicles

In the original Hebrew scriptures, I and II Chronicles are one book, probably written in the early 4th century BC. It is a theological interpretation of history, focusing on what was most meaningful and helpful for the post-exile community of Israel. Most of the narrative covers the time of Israel’s monarchy, partly derived from Samuel and Kings, but interpreted within the context of all history, from Adam to Nehemiah. It is appropriately placed at the end of the Hebrew Bible, as a theological summary of all of God’s word. The book begins with a summary of Genesis (1 Chron 1) and ends with a quotation from Ezra/Nehemiah (2 Chron 36:22-23). The main themes are the Davidic covenant, the temple, and God’s readiness to forgive and to bless those who seek Him. The three major sections of the book are

1. Genealogy (1 Chron 1-9)

2. United monarchy of David and Solomon (1 Chron 10 – 2 Chron 9)

3. Judah under the Divided Monarchy (2 Chron 10 – 36)

Genealogy (1 Chron 1-9) -- The point of genealogy is to establish solidarity with our ancestors, to help us understand our own life and purpose within the context of all who came before us. It also points to the scope of God’s purpose, His providence, and His gracious election and preservation of His own people [1]. This section thus establishes the background and foundation for the narratives in the remainder of Chronicles.

United Monarchy -- In 1 Chron 10 - 12, David becomes king over all Israel. This covers the same time span as 1 Samuel 8 – 2 Samuel 4, but abbreviated to concentrate on 1) transfer of kingship from Saul to David, and 2) expansion of David’s kingdom to include all the tribes. The kingdom was taken from Saul because he did not keep the Lord’s word, and because he sought counsel from a medium instead of from the Lord (10:13-14). David was then anointed king, and he captured Jerusalem. The Chronicler emphasizes that David won the support of all Israel.

1 Chron 13 -16 regards the transport of the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, which parallels 2 Samuel 6. They placed the ark on a cart, driven by Uzzah and Ahio. When it started to tip over, Uzzah reached out to stabilize it, and the Lord struck him down. David then took it to the house of Obed-edom, where it remained for 3 months. During that time, the house of Obed-edom was blessed, so David decided to resume its transport to Jerusalem. 1 Chron 15:2, 11-15 adds the explanation that the Lord’s original outburst was because they *“did not seek Him according to the ordinance”:* the ark should have been hand-carried by Levites, using poles (Exodus 25:14; Numbers 4:15). When it was thus done according to the law, with reverence, they were successful in bringing the ark to Jerusalem. This was followed by peace offerings and a prayer of thanksgiving:*“O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His lovingkindness is everlasting”* (16:34).

1 Chron 17-21 -- David wants to build a temple for the ark (i.e. for the Lord). Nathan, however, receives word from God that David is not the one to build a temple, but rather his son. The Lord then makes a covenant with David: *“I will appoint a place for My people Israel…I will subdue all your enemies…* ***the Lord will build a house for you****… I will set up one of your sons; I will establish his kingdom.* ***He shall build for Me a house****, and I will establish his throne forever. I will be his father and he shall be My son…”* (17:9-15). This is the central message of Chronicles, and is presented also as the central message of all scripture:

***“The Lord will build a house for you… and your son shall build a house for Me.”***

This was initially and partly fulfilled through Solomon and in the dynasty of David up to the exile. But that is only a type for the true fulfillment in Jesus Christ and in His church. Through Christ, the Lord is building a house for us, and through Christ, we are building a house for the Lord. It is one and the same house, it is His holy people, in Christ.

David then subdues the Philistines and *“the Lord helped David wherever he went. So David reigned over all Israel”* (18:14-15). In chapter 21, David sins by performing a census, then averts the destruction of Jerusalem by repentance and offering of sacrifices. David was not perfect, and consequently there were times of punishment from the Lord. But there was always opportunity for repentance, forgiveness and restoration (see Leviticus 26:40-42).

1 Chron 22-29 presents David’s commissioning of Solomon to build the temple, and the details of preparation for its construction and for the offices of the Levites. When Solomon became king, he asked for wisdom; and the Lord gave him not only wisdom, but exceeding wealth and honor.

2 Chron 1-9 focuses on the project of building the temple, with special emphasis on its function and purpose. In his prayer of dedication, Solomon describes it as a house of prayer, especially when the people have sinned and seek forgiveness: *“Listen to the supplications of Your servant and of Your people Israel when they pray toward this place; hear from your dwelling place, from heaven: hear and forgive”* (6:21). The Lord later answered: ***“If My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land”*** (7:14) [2]. This is why the temple, representing God’s presence, is so important. The remainder of Chronicles consists primarily of examples of those who thus seek His face, and find forgiveness and healing, and also of those who forsake Him, and the consequences (7:19-22) [3].

Divided Monarchy (2 Chron 10 – 36) -- Through the foolishness of Solomon’s successor, Rehoboam, the northern tribes rebel, and the kingdom was divided. The counsel given to one of his descendants, Asa, is a principle that would apply to all the kings and to all the people: *“The Lord is with you when you are with him. And if you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you.”*(15:2). The subsequent history in Chronicles is interpreted to illustrate this promise and warning from the Lord. This is the intended practical exhortation for the restored remnant.

The conclusion, in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23, is quoted from Ezra 1:1-3. It is the decree from Cyrus, as directed by the Lord: *“He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up!”* The Old Testament scriptures thus conclude with an open task and a challenge: to build the house of the Lord. This parallels the historical narrative of the New Testament, in Acts, which concludes with Paul’s unfinished missionary task of preaching the kingdom of God. The message to us, as it was to the restored remnant in Judah, is to proceed with the task of building the temple and building the kingdom. The completion, though, will be at the end of the age, in the new creation, as described in the apocalyptic writings of Daniel and Revelation. *“You will enter into rest and rise again for your allotted portion at the end of the age.”* - Daniel 12:13. *“ ‘Yes, I am coming quickly’. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”* – Rev 22:20

Notes on Chronicles

[1] Genealogies also authenticate the legitimacy of claims to kingship and priesthood, as in the ancient kings lists. Hence they establish the identity of God’s people as a royal priesthood (see Exodus 19:6; 1 Peter 2:5,9).

[2] The LORD’s name is placed in the temple (6:20; 7:16), and it is primarily a house of prayer (Isaiah 56:7; Matthew 21:13). The New Covenant equivalent to “praying towards the temple” is to pray in the name of Jesus (John 14:13-14).

[3] Two representative examples are Asa and Manasseh. King Asa begins well, but later forsakes the LORD, and suffers the consequences (2 Chronicles 16:7-12). King Manasseh begins as an evil king, but later repents and finds forgiveness (2 Chronicles 33:12-16).

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