Cornerstone

SURVEY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Vol. 2. The Promised Land to the Promised One

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A Cornerstone E-Book

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PREFACE

This two-volume e-book is based on the study units for the Cornerstone Bible Course *Survey of the Old Testament*. It contains all the material covered in the course units except for the guided extra readings and the study questions and has been formatted to enable it to be read as a normal standalone book.

Volume 1, *From Creation to Covenant*, is available for free download from FreeChristianEBooks.org.

For those who would like to take the course itself (which is free like all Cornerstone courses), it can be downloaded along with the associated textbooks from the Cornerstone website (CornerstoneCourses.org). All the extra study materials are free and those who complete the course can take a basic online test to receive a certificate of completion without any charge or cost whatsoever.

The material in this book, and the course it is based on, draws on in-depth biblical scholarship, but it is presented in a straightforward manner that is accessible to a wide range of readers. Whether you read this book because you cannot attend formal Bible school or seminary classes, to supplement such study, or to enrich your own personal study and understanding of the Bible, we are confident that you will find the following chapters helpful in gaining a better overview and a deeper understanding of the Old Testament.

14. THE PROMISED LAND

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

After approximately forty years of wandering in the wilderness, caused by the disobedience of the generation that left Egypt, the people of Israel finally entered the land their ancestors had been promised. If the early date for the exodus is accepted (see chapter 11), this would have been around 1400 BC; if the later date of the exodus is correct, it would have occurred around 1240 BC. Indications for the likelihood of the later date include the fact that Egypt controlled Canaan between 1500-1250 BC and the first mention of Israel in Egyptian records, the Merneptah Stele (see Note 2), dates to around 1207 BC.

At that time, the land of Canaan was inhabited by six groups of people: the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites (Exodus 3:8). These people were not native to the area, and no one group controlled the land or claimed it as their own. The various groups lived in small city-states, each ruled by its own king, and each consisting of a fortified town or city and its immediate surrounding area.

While they were a mixed group of different peoples, the inhabitants of Canaan unfortunately shared one common trait – their moral depravity. Leviticus 18 tells us that God cast them out of the promised land due to that extreme sinfulness when he gave the area to the Israelites. The same chapter accuses the Canaanites of specific evil practices, including child sacrifice. Some modern doubters have challenged the likelihood that this practice existed in ancient Canaan and have claimed that there is no actual historical proof for it. Archaeological evidence of child sacrifice by the Canaanites has been found, however. Ancient reliefs carved in the Egyptian temples of Karnak and Luxor, around the time of the pharaoh Rameses II (the probable period of the exodus), actually show this abominable Canaanite practice. The reliefs depict Egyptian soldiers attacking Canaanite fortified cities of the type described in the book of Joshua, and the kings of the cities are pictured making fiery offerings to their gods over the dead bodies of children on the city walls (exactly as we find described in 2 Kings 3:27). The scholarly publication of these Egyptian scenes (see Note 3) concludes that these representations unquestionably depict Canaanite child sacrifice.

Despite the evils perpetrated by the Canaanites, many people today may read the book of Joshua and fear that what it describes is genocide committed against those people by the ancient Israelites. This is actually highly unlikely. First, we should notice that far more scriptures speak of driving the Canaanites out of the land than those that mention "destroying" them (see Exodus 23:27-30; 34:24; Numbers 21:32; 32:21; 33:50-56; Deuteronomy 4:38; 9:1; 11:23; 18:12; 19:1; Joshua 13:6; 14:12; 17:18; 23:5, 9; etc.). In some cases we are told that God would drive the Canaanites out using methods similar to the plagues he placed on Egypt (Exodus 23:27-28; Joshua 24:12; etc.).

But we should remember that the language sometimes used in these accounts – of the destruction of "everything that breathed," or "men and women old and young" in certain cities – is typical of ancient Near Eastern victory announcements, even when fighting men, not civilians, were the individuals actually involved. This is less strange than it may seem at first. Today, if we tell friends that our favorite sports team recently "annihilated" or "destroyed" another team, everyone understands that we mean they won decisively. In a similar way, as scholars have long recognized, ancient Near Eastern audiences, hearing about annihilation, understood that it was more often than not simply hyperbole for victory.

Importantly, the Bible indicates this to be the case. After telling Israel to "drive out" and "destroy" the Canaanites, Moses commanded the Israelites not to marry them or worship with them (Deuteronomy 7:1-3), which would have been impossible if they were to be literally destroyed. In Joshua, after battles reporting there were no enemy survivors, we are told the enemy was still there (compare Joshua 10:1 with 15:8; etc.). And we are specifically told that many Canaanites remained in the land (Joshua 16:10; 17:12-13; etc.), showing that much of the language of destruction is metaphorical rather than literal.

Archaeology supports this understanding. Although the archaeology of the "conquest" of Canaan is complex, most of the archaeological evidence recovered does not indicate widespread destruction in the eras when the entry into the land might have occurred. Some cities (such as Lachish and Hazor) were clearly destroyed at the time of the later date for the conquest, but not most others (see Note 4). Actually, despite much excavation, until recently virtually no evidence of a "new" culture coming into the area and settling – as the Bible says the Hebrews did – had been discovered from either the earlier or later period.

But that situation has recently changed. A network of some three hundred previously unknown hilltop sites has been gradually brought to light by archaeological surveys conducted in Israel. These sites date to the period of the later date for Israelite entry into Canaan and are the kind of settlements one would expect of such an influx of people. This archaeological evidence fits well with the actual details of the biblical account: that few of the cities of Canaan were destroyed (Joshua 11:12), that the Israelites coexisted with the Canaanites to a great extent, and that even as late as the end of Joshua's life, there were many areas of the promised land that remained to be settled (Joshua 13:1-8; Judges 1:1).

The name Israel in Egyptian hieroglyphs on the Merneptah Stele, c. 1207 BC. Image: Archival.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

Joshua 4:19 tells us that the people of Israel crossed the River Jordan and entered the promised land on the tenth day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar – in the spring of the year. Although the Jordan is usually a relatively small and peaceful river, the spring months bring runoff from the northern mountain ranges and the river can become a raging torrent. Crossing the Jordan at this time was no small challenge, and the text shows that the Israelites experienced it as a scaled-down version of the crossing of the Red Sea – cementing Joshua's role as the successor of Moses.

The story is told in detail in Joshua 3:14-17. When the Israelites began to cross the Jordan, the waters flowing down toward the Dead Sea "piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam." Adam was about eighteen miles upstream (north) from where the Israelites crossed the river and was situated in an area where high mud cliffs rise directly next to the Jordan. Historical records show that mudslides frequently occur there – especially in the spring when the flooding waters undercut the cliffs, or when there are earth tremors. The mudslides that occur at Adam can

temporarily dam up the Jordan, sometimes for hours, and such occasional blocking of the river has been recorded there since AD 1160 and as recently as 1927. Whether or not God used this natural phenomenon to allow Israel to enter the land does not matter – the timing was clearly providential and is clearly described as such in Joshua.

Two chapters are devoted to the taking of Jericho (Joshua 2 and 6), probably because the city was a powerful one that controlled access to the land, and its destruction was thus a significant victory that doubtless gave Israel a psychological advantage over the people of the whole area. The story of Rahab (see chapter 14 in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*) is particularly important as it is one of a number of examples of the Israelites' peaceful acceptance of Canaanites who capitulated (as opposed to killing them as would be expected had Israel been perpetrating genocide). When the Israelite armies eventually arrived at Jericho, the destruction of the massive walls of the city may well have been accomplished by an earthquake as is sometimes claimed, but once again, whether natural phenomena were involved or not, the timing of this event was clearly providential (Joshua 6:20).

The destruction of Ai recorded in Joshua 7-8 shows the skill of Joshua as a military tactician, but also shows an incident of unfaithfulness to God's commands on the part of a single Israelite that had negative repercussions for the whole community. The incident teaches the stark lesson that, unfortunately, a wayward person can often do far more harm than one good person can accomplish for good.

Joshua 8:30-35 records the important renewal of the covenant that occurred when Joshua constructed an altar on the top of Mount Ebal, made sacrifices there, and wrote a copy of the law of Moses on stone tablets. Some archaeologists believe that the remains of this altar on Mount Ebal have been found. The structure is about twenty-five by thirty-five feet, with walls about five feet thick and nine feet high made of fieldstones, as Joshua describes. Importantly, the bones of sacrificed animals were found at the site along with pottery that dates back to c. 1200 BC. Then, with the people standing on Mount Ebal and the adjacent Mount Gerazim "Joshua read [out] all the words of the law – the blessings and the curses – just as it is written in the Book of the Law" (vs. 34).

The next event is found in Joshua 9 where the Hivite people of the city of Gibeon tricked the Israelites into making a peace treaty with them by wearing worn and patched clothes and shoes, having dry molded bread in their packs, and by saying they were from "a distant country." Here again

the Israelites had to learn a hard lesson regarding "checking the facts" and failing to ask God's guidance in important matters.

Joshua 10 records the most clearly miraculous event of the period of the settlement: that of the sun "standing still" at noon while the Israelites routed the Amorite armies that were intent on destroying them. "The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day. There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the Lord listened to a human being" (Joshua 10:13-14). It is sometimes said in support of this story that using computer calculations scientists have discovered that a day is "missing" from history, but this is nothing more than an "urban myth." In reality there is no certain way in which the event can be verified or disproved, but we should remember that God can accomplish things in many ways. Understanding how God could slow or stop the earth's rotation without major problems may be difficult, but God could have made the sun and moon *appear* to be stationary, or could have performed the miracle in some other way that gave the Israelites the time or conditions they needed.

The mention of the capture and burning of Hazor (Joshua 11:10-11) is particularly important, as excavations at that site show that a tremendous conflagration destroyed the city's Canaanite palace and temples around the time of the late date for Israelite entry into Canaan. Interestingly, the excavators found that cult statues in the burned temples had been purposefully decapitated and their hands and feet cut off. Most ancient societies carried off the gods of defeated peoples – both to take the enemy's "power" away and to add it to their own. The Israelites were probably unique in not doing this, but they destroyed their enemy's idols in a symbolic as well as a literal manner. This is, in fact, exactly how the Bible describes the destruction of the image of the pagan god Dagon in 1 Samuel 5:2-4.

The following chapters recount the eventual partitioning of the land of Canaan among the twelve tribes. As the Israelites were about to enter the promised land, the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh had asked permission to take the eastern side of the Jordan as their own area of inheritance. Joshua later gave the two and a half tribes permission to do this (Joshua 22:1-9), but when they settled in their own area they built what seemed to be a large altar next to the Jordan, on their own side of the river (Joshua 22:10). It was at this point that a potentially fatal misunderstanding occurred. The other tribes were immediately incensed at what appeared to be the rapid apostasy of the Transjordan tribes into

their own system of worship rather than honoring the altar of Yahweh which was with the rest of the tribes. So "the whole assembly of Israel gathered at Shiloh to go to war" against the eastern two and a half tribes (Joshua 22:12). Fortunately, the disaster was narrowly averted (see chapter 10 in *Old Testament Leaders*).

In its closure, the book of Joshua recounts that the covenant with God was confirmed once again at Shechem, between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerazim, which was now the location of the ark of the covenant, and that Joshua died at some point after this event.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

That the book of Joshua ends with the reconfirmation of the covenant at Shechem is not coincidental. While the two readings of the law and covenant renewals at Shechem (Joshua 8 and 24) may not be the most spectacular events described in the book, they are perhaps the most profound. The two events form the "bookends," as it were, of Joshua – framing the book in a highly significant way.

The first covenant reconfirmation occurred directly after Israel conquered Jericho and Ai – the strategic entrances to the land. Before they proceeded further, Joshua led the Israelites to Shechem where he performed the covenant renewal, as we saw, between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerazim (Joshua 8:30-35). This was the exact place where God had first promised the land to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 12:6-7) and where Moses had commanded that the covenant was to be renewed when Israel arrived in the promised land (Deuteronomy 27-28).

It was there, between Mount Ebal to the north and Mount Gerizim to the south, that Joshua set the ark, and we are told that half the Israelites stood on one side of the ark – on Mount Ebal – and the other half stood on the ark's other side – on Mount Gerazim. In positioning the ark and the people in this way Joshua repeated exactly the covenant confirmation God made with Abraham in which God (symbolized by a burning torch) appeared between the two halves of a sacrificed animal (as we saw in chapter 7). In Joshua's reconfirmation, the ark itself represented God between the two halves of the "body" of Israel – the nation serving as a living sacrifice.

Most of the nations of the ancient world offered sacrifices to their gods, but only in Israel was the idea of sacrifice connected to how people should live. It was an attitude and an approach taught by God and which grows

with Israel's story. In Egypt Moses told the pharaoh that Israel must be freed *to sacrifice to* their God (Exodus 8:8; etc.). In Joshua we see that the covenant reaffirmations at Shechem symbolized the next step in God's taking a people for himself – that his people were symbolically *to be a sacrifice to* him. The concept finds eventual New Testament expression in the words of the apostle Paul: "I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship" (Romans 12:1).

A final detail of this story shows how carefully and symbolically the mind of God designed the covenant reaffirmation ceremony at Shechem. While modern Western societies think of geographic north as being the primary cardinal orientation (hence the "N" arrows on compasses and maps), the ancient Israelites saw the world from a different perspective. The primary cardinal orientation for the Hebrews was facing east rather than north. As a result, the Hebrew word for south is *yamin* or "right hand," and the Hebrew word for north is *smol* or "left hand." But in Hebrew *yamin* is also the word for "blessing" and *smol* – on the left hand – is often associated with evil or curses (which we still see in the New Testament – as in Matthew 25:31-46). This meant that the Israelites who stood to the north and south of the ark at Shechem well understood the blessing and cursing aspects of the covenant to which they agreed.

Eventually, as the Bible shows, Israel repeatedly broke their covenant with God and reaped the punishment of which he had warned them. That punishment came, as the later prophets would repeatedly remind Israel, from nations to the *north* of Israel – the side of cursing that sadly, they had chosen.

In addition to the profound and thought-provoking lessons of the covenant found in Joshua, the book is a veritable mine of examples of the good traits of many of its characters – from Joshua's persistence (see chapter 9 in *Old Testament Leaders*) and Rahab's resourcefulness to Caleb's unflagging courage. There are few books in the Old Testament with so many worthwhile examples to study.

* Note 1: The book of Joshua is sometimes assailed by skeptics who claim the work is a fictional account not written until centuries after the events it purports to describe – perhaps sometime in the seventh century BC. However, a great many details of the book, such as the ancient names of the Canaanite city-states (Joshua 18:13; etc.) and the relative importance of those cities (Joshua 11:10) could not have been known in later times and certainly not as late as the seventh century.

*Note 2: The so-called “Berlin statue pedestal” inscription may be as much as two centuries earlier than the Merneptah Stele, but the claimed reading of “Israel” on the Berlin artifact is philologically unlikely.

* Note 3: A. Spalinger, “A Canaanite Ritual Found in Egyptian Reliefs,” *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* 8 [1978]:47-60.

* Note 4: Of the three cities that are said to have been completely burned by the Israelites, Jericho (level IV) was evidently destroyed in a violent and fiery manner, but different conclusions have been reached as to when this occurred, and excavation is complicated by significant erosion at this site. The burning of Hazor is clearly supported by evidence that the city’s Canaanite palace and temples were destroyed by fire around the time of the late date for Israelite entry into Canaan. The situation with Ai is more complex, as it is uncertain which of a number of possible sites actually represents the ruins of that city.

15. THE JUDGES

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The turbulent events described in the book of Judges cover a period of approximately 350 years – from the death of Joshua to the time of the prophet Samuel and the beginning of Israel's monarchy. Unlike the book of Joshua, however – which describes an era largely characterized by Israel's obedience to God – Judges describes a period of recurrent national unfaithfulness. The work may be classified as a tragedy, but it is one with many important lessons.

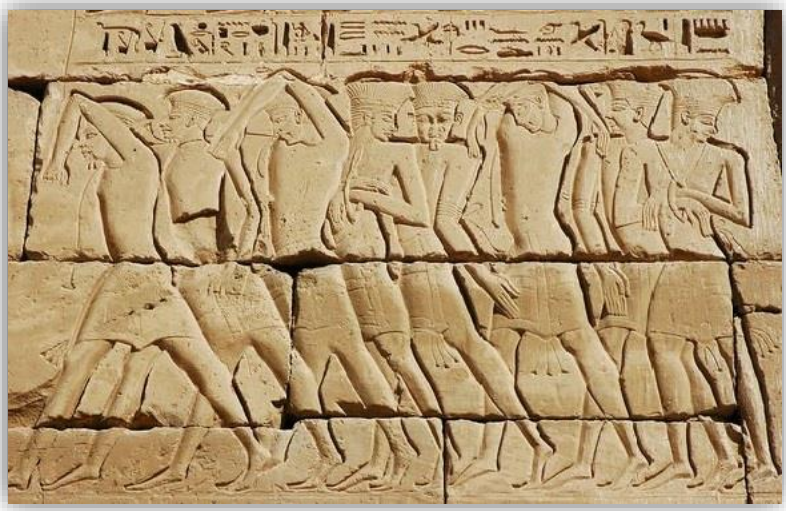
Sadly, soon after the death of Joshua, the people of Israel began to adopt the evil practices of the Canaanites they had failed to drive out of the land. This situation led to an ongoing cycle of widespread sin, oppression by a foreign power, national repentance, deliverance by a "judge" raised up by God, and then peace – which invariably led back to a new period of disobedience and sin. As a result, the book of Judges describes many tragic, violent, and sometimes disturbing events.

The Enemies of Israel

The enemies who oppressed Israel during this period give us a good indication of when the events in the book of Judges occurred. Israel was successively afflicted in its repeated periods of sinfulness by Mesopotamians, Moabites, Philistines, Canaanites, the people of Hazor, Midianites, Ishmaelites, Amorites, Philistines, Ammonites, and Philistines.

The Philistines are mentioned more frequently than any other enemy, however, showing that they were the greatest threat to Israel at this time (see, for example, Judges 10:7-8). It is known archaeologically and historically that the Philistines were a seafaring people who had arrived in Canaan along with other migrating peoples (see Note 1) around 1175 BC – dovetailing once again with a late rather than an early date for the exodus and entry into Canaan of the Israelites.

Bolstering this historical fact, the Egyptians – who controlled Canaan down to about 1250 BC and then withdrew – are mentioned only once in the book of Judges (Judges 10:11), at the beginning of the period of Judges and not after.



Philistine Prisoners of War depicted on the Medinet Habu Temple, Luxor, Egypt. Image: Archival.

Despite the many wars described in Judges, there are some rays of hope in the story. One is that Judges does say the land had a number of periods of peace, but it does not describe or focus on them. We should remember, for example, that the beautiful story told in the book of Ruth is set in the period of the judges (Ruth 1:1; and see Note 2). However, the purpose of Judges is not to look at these short periods of good, but to focus on the fact that for most of that time the Israelites had become exactly like the Canaanites they were supposed to drive out.

The judges God raised up to rescue Israel in this period did not oversee only legal matters, as judges do in our own society, they also functioned as military and administrative leaders. The Hebrew word used of them, *shofet,* also appears in other biblical passages (Psalm 2:10; etc.) where it refers to kings and means "leaders." But the judges had no hereditary authority like the later kings – they were raised up by God only at times when the Israelites were being crushed by their enemies and they cried out to God for help.

Twelve such individuals are mentioned in the book of Judges: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon and Samson – though there may have been more that are not recorded. Judges highlights only six of the twelve individuals it discusses (the others are only mentioned in a paragraph or so – or even a single

verse). Of the six judges whose actions are recorded in some detail, the first three (Othniel, Ehud, and Deborah along with Barak) seem to have been relatively good, but the next three (Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson) were increasingly flawed as the nation spiraled ever downward during this era. In this chapter we will focus on these final three judges in order to assess the situation during their times and to better see the major lessons of the book.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

Gideon, the first of the final three recorded leaders of the period, was by far the best of the group, and there are more verses dedicated to him than any other judge (Judges 6:11-8:34). Gideon led Israel at a time when the armies of Midian were destroying their trees and crops "like swarms of locusts" (Judges 6:5), and many Israelites were reduced to living in rocks and caves. At that time we are told that the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, saying "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior" (Judges 6:12). This is not to say that Gideon was actually a mighty warrior – that is just the significance of his name in Hebrew.

He appears to have been a very cautious young farm worker whose personal fear was noticeable and ongoing. When the divine visitor commanded Gideon to save Israel, he resisted and asked for a sign. Soon after, Gideon was told by God to destroy his community's Asherah pole (a cultic object used in the worship of Baal) and replace it with an altar to the Lord. He did this, but at night out of fear of his neighbors (Judges 6:25–32). Notice that in this episode Gideon was defended by his father, and we do not get the sense that Gideon was a "mighty warrior" perfectly able to defend himself.

This assessment seems to be confirmed as we progress through his story. Gideon repeatedly asked for signs that God would help him (Judges 6:37, 39; etc.), and this may have been partly why God then reduced Gideon's army from 32,000 to 300 fighting men. Once again, Gideon needed reassurance (Judges 7:13–14), and it was only then that Gideon was finally willing to act and God was able to work through him. Gideon's slowness of faith (despite his being mentioned in the "faith chapter" of Hebrews 11) is perhaps the reason the Bible never states that he "saved Israel," as is the case with most of the other judges. Gideon did eventually lead Israel effectively in battle, but his ongoing "give me a sign" attitude seems to reflect only a small amount of faith. Later, Gideon constructed an ephod –

an elaborate object connected with receiving oracles – and set this object up in such a way that it began to be worshipped by the Israelites and became a "snare" or "trap" to Gideon himself (Judges 8:27). Nevertheless, Gideon was instrumental in rescuing Israel, and Judges ends its account of his life by stressing "all the good things he had done for them" (Judges 8:35).

When we turn to Jephthah (Judges 11-12), the next major judge, we see that he successfully rallied Israel against the Ammonites – without ongoing reassurance, as Gideon had needed – but his leadership was marred by the very foolish vow he made to God: "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering" (Judges 11:30). As he should have realized might happen, "When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter" (Judges 11:34 and compare 1 Samuel 18:6). Although Jephthah said he could not break his foolish vow (Judges 11:38), scholars have long debated whether he did in fact sacrifice his daughter. While some feel that he "symbolically" sacrificed her by keeping her unmarried for the rest of her life (Judges 11:37-39) – and it is difficult to believe that he would be included in Hebrews 11 if he actually sacrificed her – other scholars feel the plain sense of the text is that he did, in fact, do as he had vowed (Judges 11:36, 39). In either case, the story of Jephthah underscores the Israelites' tragic loss of understanding of the nature of God in this time period – in thinking that he would want such a sacrifice.

The story of Samson (Judges 14-16) is a climactic one showing the deliverance of Israel – by the hands of only one man. But it is a story that is full of wrongdoing that demonstrates how far away from God Israel had slid. Interestingly, Samson is one of the few individuals mentioned in the Bible who was born miraculously despite his mother's inability to conceive children, and one of a very few mentioned in the Old Testament who was dedicated to God as a Nazarite (Numbers 6:1-21) from birth throughout his whole life. Yet there is an obvious dark side to Samson. The name Samson itself is a form of the Hebrew word "sun" and his home was just outside the town of Beth Shemesh (meaning "house" or "temple of the sun"), apparently a center of pagan sun worship in Israel. His story is remarkable in showing that he routinely broke the commandments regarding interaction with others (disobedience to parents, lying, stealing,

fornication, coveting, etc.). Although he lived and died as a heroic figure, his failings were clearly as great as his legendary strength.

But Samson did effectively counter the Philistine suppression of Israel and served as a judge of his people for twenty years. And despite his many questionable deeds, Samson clearly obeyed the impulses produced by the Spirit of God in his mind, and God was able to powerfully use him to help his people.

The book of Judges is not written in an entirely chronological manner and the final chapters – which contain some of the most tragic and disturbing stories in the book – appear to be taken from the times of various judges. The purpose of this final material in the book is to demonstrate, and actually highlight, the terrible problems of the period – and to graphically summarize Israel's need for the centralized authority of a monarchy.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

There are two very different possible views of the book of Judges that affect the theological lessons we might learn from this work. One view sees the book as cataloguing the many failings of the judges themselves, as well as Israel as a whole. The central verse that summarizes this situation tells us, "In those days Israel had no king, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25 ESV) – there was no established authority, and anarchy often ruled as a result.

Not only is this verse the closing statement and summary of Judges, but its point also appears in a total of four places in the book (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Importantly, the statement applies as much to many of the judges as it does to the people of the time, and the overall evidence of the book suggests many of the judges were not more moral than the people they led. This is the conclusion of the majority of modern scholars.

On the other hand, another view of the book is possible. Judges 2:16-17 seems to say that it was the people who were to blame, not the judges, for the evils of the era – indicating that the judges were better than the people of the time. And, in their stories, we are repeatedly told that God's Spirit worked through even the seemingly worst of the judges. In fact, despite their apparent problems, the great "faith" chapter of the New Testament, Hebrews 11, singles out four of the judges (Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah – see Note 3) as individuals of notable faith from this period – more than are mentioned from any other Old Testament book, apart from

Genesis which deals with a far longer span of time. This view asserts the judges were spiritual heroes, even though – like all of us – they may have had problems and weaknesses. Traditionally, this has been the view of many scholars who have studied the book.

But it may be that the apparent conflict between these very different views of Judges is a result of the fact that they are both true. While the book of Judges itself clearly paints a grim picture of the era and many of its leaders, the New Testament just as clearly endorses the faith of a number of the same individuals. In doing so, the New Testament accepts the fact that God is able to raise up and use leaders who may very much be the product of their own times and who may exhibit many weaknesses.

This does not mean that we need to try to explain or condone many of the things the judges may have done, but that while not accepting their behavior, we should not be blind to the fact that God could and did use them for good – as is doubtless the case with many modern leaders, also.

In this mediating view, we see the patience of God as all the more remarkable in that he consistently and continually has shown kindness to his people – when many turned to him – through the efforts of leaders he raised up despite their obvious flaws. As we will see later in this book, that is a pattern we can often discern in biblical history. This was the case with individuals such as Cyrus toward the end of the Old Testament, just as much as it was true in the era of judges like Jephthah and Samson.

The book of Judges is a study not only in the sinfulness, anarchy, and even civil wars that may occur when people turn from God, but also in the divine patience, guidance of events, and ongoing love that God shows when many do turn back to him – despite the problems and weaknesses of leaders he raises up to help them.

This is probably how the book of Hebrews encourages us to read the book of Judges. Above all, however, Judges shows the Israelites' need for a king to save them from themselves – and ultimately points forward, if we can see it, to the hope of the only king who can truly save: the Messiah.

* Note 1: The historical indications that the Philistines were originally from the islands of the Eastern Mediterranean has been confirmed by a 2019 genetic study of more than 150 bodies found in an ancient Philistine cemetery at Ashkelon on the coast of Israel. While the study found a good degree of mixing had occurred with local peoples, the Philistine genetic signatures clearly showed a European component that supports the indications that the Philistines had migrated – and settled in Canaan around the time of the judges.

* Note 2: In the Hebrew text, the book of Judges and the book of Ruth use many terms that are not often found elsewhere in the Old Testament – but while those Hebrew words are used in a negative sense in Judges, they are used in positive contexts in Ruth. While Judges shows foreigners being a curse to Israel, Ruth shows a foreigner being a blessing. Linguistically, as well as historically, Ruth shows us what the book of Judges could have been like if Israel had been loyal to God. For optional further information on Ruth, download the free e-book *Ruth: A Story of Strength, Loyalty, and Kindness* from FreeChristianEBooks.org.

* Note 3: In listing Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah, it is interesting that Hebrews 11:32 does not place them in chronological order, as it does with all the other individuals named in that chapter. Rather, Hebrews changes their order, possibly to place the more notable individuals first. Whatever the reason for their order, the inclusion of these four individuals in Hebrews 11 encourages us to remember that faith can enable flawed people to accomplish great things for God.

16. SAMUEL

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

In terms of historical significance as well as his personal dedication to God, Samuel stands head and shoulders above most other Old Testament figures. In fact, Samuel's stature as a leader in God's service is close to that of Moses – with whom he is directly compared in Jeremiah 15:1. Unlike Moses, however, Samuel is one of the very few Old Testament characters of whom nothing negative is recorded.

The events described in the book of 1 Samuel (see Note 1) took place over a period of some 110 years – from the closing days of the judges, when Samuel was born (c. 1120 BC), through the death of Israel's first king, Saul (c. 1011 BC). As the leading figure of that era, Samuel not only shepherded Israel through its transition from amphictyony (rule by judges) to monarchy, but he was also the last judge of the earlier era and the kingmaker of the second. Samuel's roles were many and important, and we summarize them here from chapter 4, "Samuel," in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*.

Samuel's primary role was that of prophet or messenger of God, and he appears to have led an order of prophets (1 Samuel 19:20). In the New Testament he is even said to have been the foremost prophet after Moses (Acts 3:22, 24).

He was also a "seer." While prophets conveyed verbal messages from God, seers saw visions which were also a form of divine communication. Samuel is called both a prophet and a seer (1 Samuel 9:11), and this dual role was significant because Samuel functioned at a time when both words and visions from the Lord were rare (1 Samuel 3:1).

Samuel certainly functioned as a priest. He may have been from the priestly tribe of Levi (1 Chronicles 6:27), and was certainly trained, and perhaps adopted, by the high priest Eli. He served in the tabernacle as a youth (1 Samuel 2:18) and continued to fulfill many priestly roles, as we see in his anointing of Saul and David (compare 1 Samuel chapters 10 and 16 with Numbers 27:15-23), making burnt offerings and peace offerings (compare 1 Samuel 13:9-14 and Leviticus 1), and in other ways.

Samuel was also the last of the judges who ruled Israel between Moses and the institution of kingship with Saul. We are told that he regularly

traveled on a judicial circuit, and "Then he would return to Ramah, for his home was there, and there also he judged Israel" (1 Samuel 7:17 ESV).

There is no evidence that Samuel himself fought, but he appears to have acted as a military leader – much as Moses also did. He is specifically mentioned along with the great fighters Jerubbaal (Gideon), Barak and Jephthah (1 Samuel 12:11), and his role as Israel's leader must have necessitated his direct involvement in the nation's security.

Samuel was also a scribe and author of several parts of Scripture. The book of Chronicles mentions "… the acts of King David, from first to last, are written in the Chronicles of Samuel the seer" (1 Chronicles 29:29 ESV), and Samuel clearly spent a great deal of time in recording the events of his own time and the period between Moses and himself. He is generally acknowledged to be the author of 1 Samuel as well as several other books of the Old Testament.

Like Samson, Samuel was a Nazarite from birth – never cutting his hair and maintaining several other ritual aspects signifying dedication to God (1 Samuel 1:11).

Perhaps above all, Samuel was an intercessor: The Old Testament gives numerous examples of Samuel's work as a mediator and intercessor for his people. For example, when Israel was attacked by the Philistines, the people begged Samuel "Do not cease to cry out to the LORD our God for us, that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines" (1 Samuel 7:8 ESV). Samuel's tireless prayer for his people was evidently heard by God on numerous occasions, and his effectiveness as an intercessor is reflected in the book of Jeremiah where God states "Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people" (Jeremiah 15:1).

In a sense, Samuel combined the roles of Moses, Aaron and Joshua – as well as others – and it would be difficult to find a more pivotal and inspiring character in Old Testament history. His influence for good would be long remembered, and even in the time of King Josiah, hundreds of years later, it was said that such a great event had not been celebrated – since the days of Samuel (2 Chronicles 35:18).

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

The book of 1 Samuel can be divided into four distinct sections: The birth and youth of Samuel (chapters 1-6), Samuel as judge and leader of Israel (7-8), the kingship of Saul (9-15), and the background to David's kingship

(16-31). Here, we will comment on some of the major events of the first three periods.

Out of all the hundreds of individuals the Bible records, only a few are discussed before birth – six in the Old Testament (Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Perez and Zerah, Samson, Samuel) and two in the New (John the Baptist, and Jesus). Not only is Samuel one of those cases, but we are also given a good number of details regarding how his mother Hannah could not have children, and that God heard her prayers and blessed her with a son (see Note 2). Although 1 Samuel deals mainly with the kingships of Saul and David and puts great stress on David, it is doubtless significant that it does not mention the birth of either of these rulers, but does describe the birth of the prophet Samuel – thus stressing his great importance.

The young Samuel is presented to the priest Eli.
Image: Archival.

In a similar way, Samuel is one of the few individuals who we are told were directly called by God (1 Samuel 3:1-10). Those individuals include the Patriarch Abraham, Moses, a few of the judges, and some of the prophets. In most cases, the individuals called directly in this way played very important roles in their own eras. Samuel's importance is stressed a third time in that we are told: "The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord" (1 Samuel 3:19-20).

The time in which Samuel took on the responsibility of leading Israel was a difficult one. As the last of the judges Samuel had to deal with the

Philistines from the coastal area of Canaan who had become Israel's major enemy, even capturing the ark of God at one point (see Note 3). But after twenty years of oppression by the Philistines, Samuel summoned the people of Israel to Mizpah (meaning "watch-tower" or "look-out") a few miles from Jerusalem, to offer a sacrifice to God and ask him to forgive their sins. Samuel then led Israel against the Philistine army and decisively defeated it, after which he erected a memorial at the site, doubtless thanking God for Israel's deliverance.

Samuel's victory was followed by a long period of peace for Israel, but the need for strong leadership to deal with the Philistines continued. The aging Samuel had initially appointed his two sons to be his successors, but they proved themselves unworthy and were rejected. The tribal leaders of Israel then requested that Samuel appoint a king to lead them. God guided Samuel to comply with this request and the prophet anointed Saul as Israel's first king (1 Samuel 10:1-26).

Almost immediately, Saul successfully led a large group of Israelites against an enemy (see note 4). Soon after this, Samuel assembled the people at Gilgal (1 Samuel 11:14-15), which was the first place the Israelites camped after crossing the Jordan and where the people dedicated themselves to God (Joshua 5:2-10). There Samuel delivered a farewell speech in which he endorsed Saul. But although Saul grew in leadership (see chapter 19 in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*) and proved himself a capable military commander, the originally reticent king soon showed that he could not be trusted to be faithful to God. First, when Saul was preparing to fight the Philistines, although not qualified to do so, he offered a sacrifice before the battle instead of waiting for Samuel as he had been instructed (1 Samuel 13:13). Then Samuel directed Saul to destroy the Amalekites but not to take their possessions (in fulfilment of the commandment in Deuteronomy 25:17-19), and Saul disobeyed God's command in this also (1 Samuel 15:34-35). As a result of his unfaithfulness, Saul was rejected by God.

Following Saul's rejection, we are told that "the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him" (1 Samuel 16:14). Although this might sound as though God directly sent an "evil spirit," the wording is entirely different from all the times God is said to have sent his own Spirit to influence individuals – including Saul (1 Samuel 10:10; etc.), and the sense seems to be that God *allowed* an evil spirit to influence Saul. In recording the fact that music calmed Saul, the Bible may be pointing out a partially physical aspect to Saul's condition, but

it also shows the ultimate futility of attempting to treat a spiritual problem with a physical solution.

Saul's susceptibility to the influence of evil is also seen in that although he had earlier expelled the mediums and spiritists from Israel, after Samuel's death the king sought one out to try to gain advice from the deceased prophet. The section of Scripture in question (1 Samuel 28:3-25) does not say that Saul saw the "ghost" or "spirit" of Samuel, but that the medium saw such a vision.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

The first book of Samuel is a rich mine of theological concepts and lessons. From the birth of Samuel in the book's opening chapter to his death near its end, we can learn much from the life of this man of God. Samuel was a strong and selfless leader, but perhaps the main lesson we can learn from him is his unfailing loyalty to God. As a Nazarite from birth, Samuel is shown in great contrast to Samson – the last of the major judges before him. While Samson seems to have attached little importance to his Nazarite vows and exhibited great personal failings, Samuel faithfully maintained his vows throughout his life and became one of the most obedient and powerful servants of God in the Old Testament era. The same kind of contrast is made between Samuel and Saul – the leader who followed him, but who failed.

Just as Samuel became Israel's leader instead of Eli's sons (1 Samuel 2:12-17; 3:12-13), Saul was chosen from the minor tribe descended from Jacob's youngest son, Benjamin (Genesis 43:29), and David was chosen as the next king though he was the youngest among his many brothers (1 Samuel 16:1-13). In all these cases, the expected patterns of success and succession were overturned by God who (as he did with the patriarchs) often reversed the normal order of things and worked through the youngest and the least important or least expected individuals – raising those who showed humility (in Saul's case, at least at first – 1 Samuel 15:17) to lead powerfully. This was certainly the case with David, as we will see more fully in the next chapter of this book, but the most important theological issue in 1 Samuel is not the king's character or whether Israel should have a king (Israelite kingship was foretold by God as early as the time of Abraham – Genesis 17:6), but whether the monarchy would take Israel closer to God or further from him.

More specifically, the combined book of Samuel asks how the people of Israel would maintain a theocracy – perfect rule by God – at the same time as a monarchy – flawed human rule. In this situation we see the diplomatic skill and spiritual dedication of Samuel who called the people of Israel to repentance and renewal of their allegiance to God *at the same time* that he inaugurated Saul as king (1 Samuel 12:20-25). This is a vital part of the message of 1 Samuel: by establishing Israel's kingship in the context of its covenant with God, rather than the strength or the qualifications of the king, Samuel placed it on a radically different foundation from kingship in other nations.

This meant that Israel's king would not hold absolute power but would be subject to both the law of God and the words of his prophets (1 Samuel 15:17-23). As such, Israel's king was to be an agent of God's rulership of his people, rather than a competing authority – and he was to be under exactly the same law of God as the people themselves (1 Samuel 12:14–15). In this way, the story of Samuel provided the intended blueprint for Israel's kingship for centuries to come.

Even more than that, Samuel's story contains the first explicit mention in the Bible of the concept of the Messiah – the king who would rule righteously under God. The word "messiah" means "the anointed one," just as Samuel anointed both Saul and David as kings of Israel by pouring oil on their heads (1 Samuel 10:1; 16:13). Thus, throughout the book, David refers to Saul as "the LORD'S anointed," or literally, "the LORD'S messiah." It is interesting, however, that the very first instance of this royal concept of the anointed king in the book – and in the Old Testament as a whole – is with Samuel's mother Hannah. At the beginning of the book, when Hannah gave thanks after dedicating the son God had given her to his service, her prayer actually ended with a prophecy made at a time when Israel had no king: "The LORD will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed" (1 Samuel 2:10). It is fitting that a prayer of dedication for the one who would anoint Israel's first kings would prophesy the messianic king who would later come from that line.

* Note 1: Our books of 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel were originally a single "book" in the Hebrew Bible, though when it was translated into the ancient Greek Septuagint version, it was too long to fit on a single scroll and was divided into two halves. This is because Hebrew was not written with vowels and the added vowels in the Greek words made the text far longer. The material in the book was compiled over some time. While Samuel himself may have written parts of it – up to his death as

recorded in 1 Samuel 25:1 – he is not mentioned at all in 2 Samuel, which was obviously compiled later. It was only after the Reformation that these books (originally known as 1 and 2 Kings) were named "1 and 2 Samuel" after the prophet Samuel.

* Note 2: Samuel means "the name of God," but can also be understood as "God heard" and this is the meaning the Bible chooses in 1 Samuel 1:20 where his mother Hannah named Samuel to commemorate God's answer to her prayer for a son. This meaning is also connected to the Hebrew word for "asked" (*sha'al*) which appears seven times in the first chapter of 1 Samuel.

* Note 3: The numbers cited for those who died for improperly looking into the ark after it was captured and then returned (1 Samuel 6:19) require comment. The King James Bible (and its derivatives) says that 50,070 people were killed at this time, but it is generally agreed that there is a mistake in the text here. In the Hebrew Bible numbers were represented by letters rather than by numerals and could sometimes be misread for similar letters. In the verse in question, it appears that a correct reading was included with an incorrect one – the text is ungrammatical and the village of Beth-Shemesh cannot have contained 50,000 inhabitants. So, many translations (NIV, ESV, etc.) translate the number as "70," as do a number of ancient Hebrew manuscripts.

* Note 4: 1 Samuel 11:8 tells us that Saul led 300,000 Israelites and 30,000 men of Judah. But the Hebrew word translated thousands here and elsewhere in the Old Testament can mean divisions – so it may be that a total of some 330 groups of fighting men were involved rather than 330,000.

17. DAVID

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

There is no question that David is one of the most important figures in the Old Testament and the Bible as a whole. One measure of his importance is how often he is mentioned in the Bible – about 1,000 times in most translations (for example, in the NIV, 974 times as "David," 26 times as "the son of Jesse"). This is far more than Abraham or Moses or any biblical personality other than Jesus.

The religious importance of David is immense, as we will see, and the story of David has had a profound effect on Western culture – inspiring countless literary and artistic compositions from early Christian paintings to Michelangelo's Renaissance statue "David," and modern works such as Sir Timothy Rice's musical "David" and Leonard Cohen's pop-rock song "Hallelujah." Perhaps no other Old Testament character appears so dynamic, so colorful, so human, or so devout.

The great-grandson of Ruth and Boaz (1 Chronicles 2:12), David was from the tribe of Judah, the son of Jesse of Bethlehem and was either the youngest of seven sons (1 Chronicles 2:13-15) or, more likely, had seven brothers (1 Samuel 16:10-11 – see Note 1).

Despite or because of his humble beginnings, David became the second king of Israel (see Note 2) shortly before 1000 BC. He may have been born around 1040 BC and was anointed to be Saul's successor (1 Samuel 16:1–13) when he was only about fifteen – around 1025 BC. It was not until Saul's death, however, that David became king over Judah around 1010 BC (1 Samuel 31:3-6); and it was not till seven years later, around 1003 BC, that he was accepted as king over all Israel (2 Samuel 5:1-5). It was at this time that David captured Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5:6-10) which would become his royal capital, the "City of David" – the center of Israel's kingdom until the nation was torn apart two generations later. David died around 970 BC, a hero to his people and the founder of a growing kingdom.

The international geopolitical situation of that era made this rise of Israelite power under David possible. Ancient Israel was sandwiched between three superpowers of that age – Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Hittite Empire. For much of history, one or the other of these powers controlled much of the area of Canaan, but with the migration into the area of the "Sea Peoples" (including the Philistines) around 1200 BC the outside

powers were effectively neutralized. Although Egypt itself was able to repulse the invaders from its own land in the reign of Rameses III (1186 to 1155 BC), the Egyptians could no longer control the main international throughfare of the Canaanite coastal plain where the Philistines settled. This left the Israelites in the mountainous inner region of Canaan in relative peace – apart from frequent altercations with the Philistines themselves – during the period of the judges and the early monarchy. Once Saul and David finally repulsed the Philistine threat, Israel was able to develop into a relatively prosperous and secure kingdom in the later reign of David and that of his son, Solomon.

As a result, it is perhaps not surprising that David is the first figure in the Hebrew Bible for whom we have archaeological evidence. An Aramaic inscription dating to the ninth century BC and discovered in 1993 at Tel Dan in Israel speaks of the "king of the House of David" not long after the time of David himself. Another inscription from around 840 BC (the Moab Stele) may also refer to David.

But the evidence for David comes mainly, of course, from the Bible. As the main character in three major biblical books, David's life is covered in more detail than any other Old Testament figure, and most of the records clearly come from David's own lifetime. In 1 Chronicles 29:29 we read: "As for the events of King David's reign, from beginning to end, they are written in the records of Samuel the seer, the records of Nathan the prophet and the records of Gad the seer." These three individuals all knew and interacted with David, and their works doubtless form the basis of the books we call 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles. There are differences in these works that record David's life, however. While 1 and 2 Samuel give an unvarnished picture of David's faults as well as his strengths, the later book of 1 Chronicles gives a much more edited version which focuses on David's role as the founder of Judean kingship. For example, if we read 1 Chronicles 20, it is evident that the story of Bathsheba fits in there, but it is not included. Because Chronicles was written much later than the book of Samuel, the situation was different, and its readers needed to understand the theological significance of David more than his personality and character.

Finally, of course, we have a rich mine of information regarding David in the songs or psalms he wrote. David is credited with seventy-five of the compositions found in the book of Psalms and may have written a number of the others, also. As we will see, this material gives a closer look into the mind of the king than we find with any other biblical character.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

The Bible gives so much information about David that we cannot possibly discuss it all in this chapter. Instead, we will look in this section at some key passages that may be somewhat difficult to understand or that are sometimes misunderstood.

1 Samuel 13:14 tells us that God had "sought out a man after his own heart," and this statement is often understood to mean someone who was in some way like God. But the Hebrew expression means simply that God had selected an individual of his own choosing – according to his own will or purpose – rather than someone chosen according to the will of the Israelites themselves (1 Samuel 9:20). The expression does not concern the nature of David but demonstrates God's will in rejecting Saul.

1 Samuel 16:12-13 describes Samuel's anointing of David. Although the Bible records the anointing of the priests (Exodus 29:7) to consecrate them, the anointing of kings seems to have been somewhat different. In ancient Egypt, and perhaps in some other Near Eastern cultures, although the king was not anointed, he anointed the lesser rulers who were subject to him. This anointing stressed both their subordinate relationship to the great king and his protection of them. Such a meaning seems to fit the priestly anointing of Israelite kings – signifying their coming under the rule and protection of God – though they were sometimes also anointed by the people, as was David in 2 Samuel 2:4. In such cases, the anointing seems to signify a contractual relationship between the king and the people he was to rule over.

1 Samuel 17 tells the story of David and Goliath. Although the story of David's slaying of a "giant" is sometimes seen as fanciful, there is nothing far-fetched about the account. In the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible the height of Goliath is given as "six cubits and a span," which is around nine feet nine inches, though both the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls (followed by a number of modern translations such as the ESV and NET Bibles) record his height as "four cubits and a span" or about seven feet tall. In either case, an Egyptian letter (Papyrus Anastasi I) of the thirteenth century BC describes warriors in Canaan who are seven to nine feet tall, giving historical support to the biblical account. The *Guinness Book of Records* lists more than twenty individuals over eight feet tall in the last century or so.

"David and Goliath" by Guillaume Courtois (1628-1679). Image: Archival.

1 Samuel 18:1 and 2 Samuel 1:26 record the affection between David and Saul's son, Jonathan, which has been considered by some to have been sexually based. The two verses say: "Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself" and "Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women." 1 Samuel uses exactly the same word for love (*ahab*) in saying "all Israel and Judah loved David," and no one would suggest that this was also sexual love. The Bible shows many types of love, and David and Jonathan's relationship was simply a profound example of close comradeship and friendship – the type of love the New Testament calls *philia* or "brotherly love." David knew the commands regarding sexual relations found in the law (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13), continually praised the law and stressed how he loved it throughout his psalms. To see more in his friendship with Jonathan than the text says is to read something into it that is not there.

1 Samuel 18:4 tells how Jonathan gave gifts to David, including "the robe he was wearing." The word used often denotes a royal robe. Ancient texts from nearby Ugarit mention that the crown prince wore a special identifying robe in that city. If Israel had the same custom, Jonathan (who knew David would be the next king – 1 Samuel 23:17) was in effect renouncing his claim to the throne by giving David his princely robe.

1 Samuel 21:10-15 relates how David fled from Saul to the Philistine city of Gath (ironically, the city of Goliath) for his own safety. But when some

of the Philistines suggested that if this were indeed David, he might be a threat they should dispose of, David cleverly feigned insanity – not to pretend that he, David, was insane, but that he was an insane person claiming to be David. 1 Samuel 22:3-4 shows David next fled to Moab – another enemy of Israel – temporarily hiding his parents there. In doing this, David likely stressed his own partial Moabite ancestry through his great-grandmother Ruth (Ruth 4:17). After hiding in wilderness areas for much of Saul's reign – and twice refusing to kill the king when he had opportunity – David remained loyal to Saul as "the LORD's anointed" until the latter's death.

2 Samuel 5 tells us that, after being anointed king of all Israel, the next major event was David's capture of Jerusalem. The city had been taken at the time of the conquest (Judges 1:8), but the Israelites had not driven out the inhabitants (Judges 1:21), which is why the city had to be retaken at this time. In verse 6 the central fortified area is called "Zion" – a name of uncertain meaning which eventually came to be used for the whole of Jerusalem. The strategically located city became the capital of David's kingdom.

2 Samuel 6:14-21 records David bringing the ark into Jerusalem. His "dancing" is said to have earned the disapproval of his wife Michal, and the activity is often portrayed as wild or ecstatic gyration unbecoming a king. But the Hebrew word *makarker* translated "dancing" in verses 14 and 16 is used only in this passage and nowhere else in Scripture. However, the same word was used in the related language of Ugarit where it is known to have meant movement of the *fingers*. Similarly, the word *mapazzez* translated "leaping" in verse 16 is used only in this verse and in a variant form of the verb in Genesis 49:24, where it describes the movement of the *arms*: "his arms were made agile" (ESV). So, it is likely that in fact David was not actually involved in "dancing," but in the swaying of his arms and snapping or waving of his fingers as he proceeded before the ark. The passage shows that Michal was actually upset because David had taken off his royal robe and had led the procession in a simple linen tunic (v. 20).

2 Samuel 7 contains the promises made to David when the king desired to build a temple for God. This event is really the high point of the story of David, and we will look at it more closely below. But notice that although God gave great and lasting promises to David, he declined to allow the king to build his temple due to the fact that as a warrior David had shed much blood (1 Chronicles 22:8). In explaining to the Phoenician king, Hiram, why David had not built a temple, Solomon later gave a different reason:

"because of the wars waged against my father" (1 Kings 5:3). This is not a contradiction, but an ancient example of "political spin," in which the facts were worded as diplomatically as possible.

The rest of 2 Samuel (see Note 3) and the parallel passages in 1 Chronicles tell of events regarding David's further establishment of his kingdom and the occasions on which he failed in some way (his affair with Bathsheba; the numbering of the people; etc.) or in which his family members failed him. David's first six sons were by six different wives (2 Samuel 3:2-6), and this complex situation led to much family infighting and the rebellions of his sons Absalom (2 Samuel 13) and Adonijah (1 Kings 1). Yet, as we will see, despite its personal and political problems, the reign of David was overall a righteous one which became the measure by which all later kings would be judged.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

We can learn much from the life of David, of course, but two aspects of his story are of particular importance: 1) the way he conducted his life, and 2) the covenant that God made with him.

1) We have already mentioned several unique aspects of the Bible's portrait of David. The stories of David also provide a body of material that is unique in showing David's actions from the outside – as recorded in the books of Samuel and Chronicles, *and* his thoughts on the inside – as recorded in the Psalms. No other person in the Old Testament is so well documented. Although a great deal is said about Joseph and Moses, for example, very little is said about their inner thoughts. On the other hand, the Psalms reveal David's thoughts firsthand and in all kinds of situations.

As a result, David gives us a key reference point for a personal relationship with God. The Bible records as many of his faults as it does his strengths and accomplishments; but if the historical books record the king's frequent failures, the Psalms record his ongoing attitude of repentance and his undying desire to please and obey God (for example, Psalm 51). David also experienced a great deal of difficulty in his life – from persecution to personal loss, and the experience of having close friends and even sons become his enemies. The Psalms describe his walk with God during those difficulties and the trust he maintained throughout them (for example, Psalm 23).

The account of David's life and his own portrayal of it strike a chord of both realism and hope in every believer. That is doubtless why Psalms (see Note 4) is the most read book of the whole Bible and why more people are encouraged by the things David wrote than any other writer of the Old Testament. David, like all of us, failed in a great many ways. Yet the primary lesson we gain from his life story is that God can and does continue to work with us as long as we continue to seek him (see Note 5).

2) The realism and intensity of David's walk with God formed the basis of a relationship which God blessed richly, and the greatest of those blessings was the covenant God made with the king. The first part of God's promise to David is recorded as follows:

> 'When your days are over and you go to be with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. I will never take my love away from him, as I took it away from your predecessor. I will set him over my house and my kingdom forever; his throne will be established forever.' (1 Chronicles 17:11-14)

The second part of God's promise to David is found in 1 Chronicles 22:7-10, which shows that this promised son was to be David's son Solomon who would build the temple David had wanted to construct for God. But, just like God's covenant with Abraham, there was clearly a future aspect of the promise that would be fulfilled not by David's immediate son, but by his eventual descendant, the Messiah. We see this ultimate reality in 1 Chronicles 17:12 – that the future descendant would also build a house for God (2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4-6). We also see in 1 Chronicles 17:14 that his kingdom would be established for eternity. David's human kingdom came to an end with the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, but the promise is still being fulfilled through the messianic King of David's line, Jesus Christ.

The promise to David represents one of the three great covenants described in the Old Testament (those of Abraham, Moses, and David) upon which the rest of the Bible is based. In each covenant there was a preliminary fulfillment as well as a future one of greater importance. So it is essential to keep the Davidic covenant in mind as we read the rest of the

Old Testament if we are to understand much of what occurred in Israel's later history, as well as the message of Israel's prophets, and the role that Jesus fulfilled (Matthew 1:1; Luke 1:32-33; Acts 13:22-23; etc.). This spiritual aspect to the promises made to David is why Psalms is the book of the Old Testament that is most quoted in the New Testament, and why the story of David is a direct part of an ongoing narrative that begins in Genesis and finds eventual fulfillment not in the Old Testament, but in the New.

* Note 1: The apparent discrepancy in the number of David's brothers is probably the result of the fact that when an individual died without leaving any children, he was often omitted from genealogical records which stressed continuing families. The passage in 1 Samuel may thus have been written in David's lifetime before the death of one of his brothers, while the genealogical list of 1 Chronicles was recorded later.

* Note 2: Some count David as Israel's third king because when Saul died, Abner son of Ner, the commander of Saul's army, made Saul's son Ish-Bosheth king over Israel. Nevertheless, David had already been anointed as king by Samuel (1 Samuel 16:1-13), so David took precedence both in time order and in God's sight as the second king of Israel.

* Note 3: The account of David in 2 Samuel is not always given in strict chronological order. For example, the events of 2 Samuel 7 seem to have occurred after those of chapter 8, and the account of the famine during David's reign is given in 2 Samuel 21, though it occurred before Absalom's rebellion recorded in 2 Samuel 15–18.

* Note 4: For optional further study of David's psalms, we recommend the free e-book, *Spotlight on the Psalms,* which can be downloaded from www.FreeChristianEBooks.org.

* Note 5: David's last words include a saying that might well serve as the king's obituary: "When one rules over people in righteousness, when he rules in the fear of God, he is like the light of morning at sunrise …" (2 Samuel 23:3-4).

18. SOLOMON

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The successor to David's throne, Solomon (meaning "peaceful") was also called Jedidiah ("friend of God") and ruled in Jerusalem from around 970 to 931 BC. The first surviving child of David and his wife Bathsheba, the widow of Uriah the Hittite, Solomon had three full brothers (including Nathan who will enter the story later) as well as six known older half-brothers born of six of David's other queens.

It is thought that Solomon ascended to the throne when he was only about fifteen years old, but he soon established himself as a king who would propel the nation of ancient Israel to a level of power and international political standing seldom, if ever, equaled again. The king's accomplishments were many (see chapter 21 in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*), but he is remembered above all for two things: his great wisdom and his construction of the temple for God in Jerusalem. Both these aspects of Solomon's reign are better understood when seen in perspective.

Solomon's wisdom is celebrated and documented in detail in 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, and 2 Chronicles, and the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and some of the Psalms are thought to have been composed by him. These works follow the pattern of "wisdom literature" that was widespread in the ancient Near East, and the book of Proverbs in particular – a collection of short, practical statements regarding right conduct and living – is very similar in structure and content to comparable wisdom literature from Egypt. For example, there are a number of aspects of the book of Proverbs that closely match the "Instruction of Amenemope," an ancient Egyptian literary work composed c. 1300-1100 BC, well before the book of Proverbs.

Like Amenemope, Proverbs is written to the writer's son and offered advice that would help him in life. The authors of both works urge their sons to pay attention to this advice: "Give your ears, listen to the things which are spoken" (Amenemope iii, 9); "pay attention to my wisdom, turn your ear to my words" (Proverbs 5:1). Just as Amenemope tells his son "See for yourself these thirty chapters, they are pleasant, they educate" (Amenemope xxvii, 7–8), so the author of Proverbs writes: "I have written

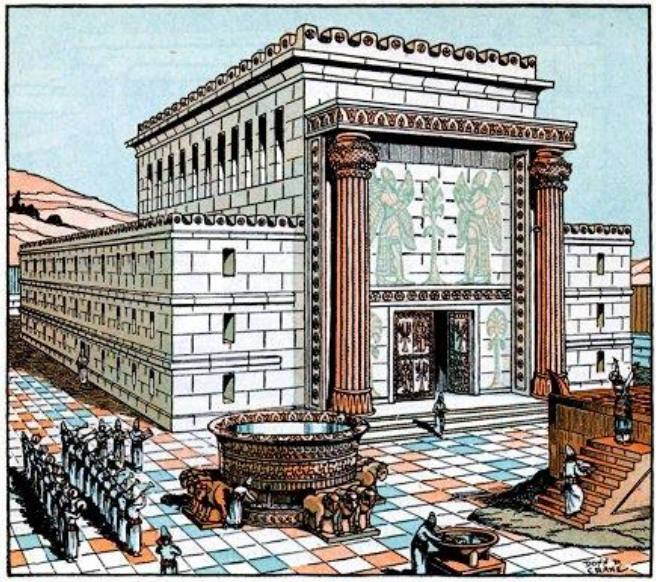
thirty sayings for you, filled with advice and knowledge" (Proverbs 22:20 NLT).

A number of specific statements in Amenemope are also found paralleled in Proverbs – as we see in this example: "They [riches] make themselves wings like geese, and fly to heaven" (Amenemope x, 5); "For wealth certainly makes itself wings like an eagle that flies toward the heavens" (Proverbs 23:5 NASB). Such examples demonstrate that Solomon not only utilized the form of literary genres of his time, but also that he collected many wise sayings from other sources – just as the Bible tells us (Ecclesiastes 12:9). But Solomon's original contributions to wisdom literature were extensive, and we are told that he "spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five" as well as that he discussed plant and animal life in what were perhaps early examples of pre-scientific observation (1 Kings 4:32-33).

In addition to his great wisdom, Solomon was famous for his building projects – the greatest of which was the temple of God that the king built in Jerusalem. Sadly, excavation of the area of this temple is impossible because of modern political issues, but we are fortunate that another temple is known – that of Ain Dara in northern Syria – that was strikingly similar to Solomon's structure. The Ain Dara temple, which functioned from around 1300 BC until 740 BC, was doubtless known to the Phoenician craftsmen who worked for Solomon and may well have served as one of a number of models for the construction of Israel's temple around 964-957 BC.

Both the Jerusalem and Ain Dara temples were constructed on massive artificial platforms, and both followed the same tripartite plan with an entrance porch containing two massive columns, a main hall (divided in two halves in the Ain Dara temple), and an inner shrine or holy place. Both structures seem to have been flanked on three sides by multistory chambers (1 Kings 6:5), which were probably used for priestly and religious purposes. The decorative motifs of both temples were also very similar. At Ain Dara both the exterior and interior of the temple were decorated with the figures of lions and mythical animals such as sphinxes and cherubim as well as floral and geometric designs. Likewise, 1 Kings 6:29 tells us that on the walls all around the temple Solomon "carved cherubim, palm trees and open flowers." However, it seems that the temple at Ain Dara was likely built of mud-brick covered with wood paneling, while the temple of Solomon was constructed mainly of stone (see Note 1) with much of its

cedar paneling and even the floor overlaid with gold (1 Kings 6:21, 30, 35) – making it far more impressive overall.



Artist's conception of the Temple of Solomon. Image: Archival.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

In this section we will look at some of the key events in Solomon's reign and their broader significance.

The first chapter of 1 Kings records that when David became old, his son Adonijah attempted to make himself king. Nathan the prophet (who had accused David of his sin with Bathsheba, but who was a loyal supporter of the king) wisely guided Bathsheba to ask David to appoint her son Solomon as the new king. In effect, Nathan steered David into applying a co-regency – a model of kingship widely used in the ancient Near East – whereby an aging king declared a chosen son co-ruler with himself for the last period of his life, thus avoiding power struggles in the royal family after the king's death.

1 Kings 2:13-25 shows that Adonijah had not finished scheming, however. He asked to marry Abishag, the young woman who had helped King David at the end of his life. For this request, Solomon had Adonijah executed and while this may seem strange, it is because whoever took over a king's wives was presumed to be the new king. If Solomon allowed his half-brother to marry Abishag, Adonijah would doubtless have used that

fact to strengthen his case to take over the throne. Solomon, as instructed by David, also had the unfaithful general Joab executed (vss. 28-34), and from that point his kingship was secure.

1 Kings 3:1 then tells us, "Solomon made an alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt and married his daughter." This is particularly significant as it shows Solomon's power and international standing. It was common in the ancient Near East for kings to establish political alliances through arranged marriages in which lesser kings gave their daughters in marriage to greater kings – but the pharaohs of Egypt very rarely did this, as they were usually among the most powerful kings. In this case it was probably the Twenty First Dynasty pharaoh, Siamun (986 - 967 BC) whose daughter married Solomon. Many scholars feel that there is good indication that the biblical "Song of Songs" was composed by Solomon regarding this Egyptian princess.

1 Kings 3:4-15 tells how God appeared to Solomon in a dream and granted the king's request for wisdom. This event is pivotal to understanding what follows in Solomon's story, as it explains why his level of wisdom was as great as it was (1 Kings 4:30). The following sections of 1 Kings give examples of that wisdom – such as 1 Kings 3:16-28, the story of how Solomon wisely discerned the true mother of a child claimed by two prostitutes. This story not only shows the king's wisdom but is included because it also shows his willingness to "rule for everyone," including hearing the cases of even those considered to be the lowest social groups.

1 Kings 4:7-19 explains how Solomon redrew the traditional borders of the tribes of Israel. It is easy to read over these verses without realizing that this is given as another example of the king's wisdom. In redistricting the land, Solomon broke the old tribal boundaries and mixed in some new areas and their populations, thus weakening the power of the individual tribes, permitting him to develop a taxation system (vss. 27-28) and to establish a much stronger centralized administration for his kingdom.

1 Kings 4:21 tells us "Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt." This is significant because it matches the boundaries of the promised land as given in Deuteronomy 1 and Joshua 1 and because it was the first and only time, historically, that those boundaries were achieved by ancient Israel.

1 Kings 5:1 - 6:38 and 2 Chronicles 2:1-18 record how Solomon corresponded with Hiram I (980-947 BC), king of the Phoenician coastal city of Tyre to the north of Israel, to build the temple for God that David

had originally planned. The Phoenicians controlled the woodcutting and distribution from the great cedar forests of the Lebanese mountains and were also known for their craftsmen skilled in many aspects of the construction and decoration of palaces and other monumental buildings. Hiram had built David's palace for him (2 Samuel 5:11), so relations were already established between the two areas. The Phoenicians were also skilled mariners, and Hiram and Solomon jointly developed a trade route through the Red Sea with a land called Ophir that seems to have been far to the east (see Note 2).

1 Kings 5-7 and 2 Chronicles 3-4 describe the construction of the temple, which was the greatest of Solomon's many building projects. It was a permanent replacement of the portable tabernacle used by Israel in its period of desert wanderings, and the massiveness of this structure is seen in that its foundation blocks were as much as fifteen feet in length, each weighing a great many tons. The two free-standing columns named "Jachin" and "Boaz" that flanked the temple entrance were cast from bronze and were over thirty feet high and almost five feet in diameter. Just as impressive as its scale, the decoration of the temple involved almost unimaginable quantities of gold – literally many tons – as well as silver and costly fabrics and furnishings. Not surprisingly, the temple's construction took seven full years.

1 Kings 7:1-12 tells of the building of Solomon's massive palace complex, which was larger than the temple in ground area as it included administrative offices, throne rooms, audience halls, and other areas in addition to the king's own home. The "Palace of the Forest of Lebanon" with its virtual "forest" of forty-five cedar pillars was only one such part at approximately 150 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high. The building of the temple and Solomon's palace together took twenty years (1 Kings 9:10).

1 Kings 10:1-13 and 2 Chronicles 9: 1-12 recount the visit of the Queen of Sheba (probably an area in the southern part of the Arabian peninsula), one of the most well-known episodes in Solomon's story, although it is given as a side-note to show Solomon's international reputation for wisdom and wealth (1 Kings 10:14-29). It is helpful to remember that "wisdom" in the ancient world was a far more practical concept than it tends to be today. Solomon's works of building and development would all have been seen as expressions of wisdom. The queen's gift of 120 talents of gold is a staggering amount of several tons and is the same as the amount Hiram of Tyre had given to Solomon – so it was probably to seal a trade or political partnership rather than strictly a "gift."

I Kings 11:1-13 tells how Solomon was led astray by his many foreign wives. We have already looked at Solomon's marriage to an Egyptian princess, but as time progressed the king married a great number of foreign wives who began to influence Solomon through their worship of false gods, as we will see. Sadly, this was the turning point in Solomon's life, and the rest of his story centers on the decline of his relationship with God and on the enemies that God allowed to rise against him.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

When Solomon was born, God sent a message to David and Bathsheba through the prophet Nathan – the same prophet he had used to reprimand David for his adultery with Bathsheba and the killing of her husband Uriah. Although God had allowed the child conceived of that sin to die, he showed his acceptance of David's repentance in acknowledging his marriage with Bathsheba and by telling them to name Solomon, their second child, Jedidiah – meaning "beloved of the Lord" (2 Samuel 12:25). In that way Solomon was a living image of God's grace – proof that God does fully accept true repentance – and the name God gave Solomon was also a word picture of God's love for him despite the circumstances of his background.

At first, Solomon's attitude toward God was also one of love – 1 Kings 3:3 tells us: "Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of David his father." Yet this verse continues, "only he sacrificed and made offerings at the high places." These "high places" were the unofficial locations for worship in ancient Israel, often associated with the local gods or elements of right and wrong worship, and we can only wonder what their attraction was to Solomon. Given his later history, it is more than likely that Solomon wanted to please the people by joining them in their worship although it was not true to God. Even when Solomon had built the temple for God and had dedicated it with great devotion (see 1 Kings 8), we read:

> King Solomon … loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. (1 Kings 11:1-3)

Although God had warned Solomon explicitly not to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the LORD's command; as a result, 1 Kings 11 continues:

> The LORD became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice. Although he had forbidden Solomon to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the LORD's command. So the LORD said to Solomon, "Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates." (1 Kings 11:9-11)

We might well wonder what the reason was for this failure on Solomon's part, but the Bible gives us a clear clue. At the dedication of the temple, Solomon himself told the people: "may your hearts *be fully committed* to the LORD our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands" (1 Kings 8:61, emphasis added). Ironically, that was exactly the way in which Solomon failed – he was committed to God, but not *fully*. The Bible confirms this in recording "As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and *his heart was not fully devoted* to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been." (1 Kings 11:4, emphasis added)

This is perhaps the greatest lesson we can learn from Solomon, and it is as important a lesson as any we learn from his father, David. No matter how dedicated to God we may feel or seem to be, if we are not *fully* dedicated – if there is any area in which we routinely hold back from full commitment – that problem or area will eventually separate us from God whether we have spent years building him a temple or in worshipping and serving him in any other way. It is a sobering lesson, but a vital one. Whatever our level of dedication, it will eventually fail if it is not complete.

No matter how strong Solomon's love of God had been, over time he was pulled away from his original devotion and gradually lost his spiritual bearings. We see this quite graphically in the book of Ecclesiastes that was doubtless composed by Solomon (Ecclesiastes 1:1; etc.) – in the way that he began to search for meaning and satisfaction in transient physical things. It is possible that late in his life, when Ecclesiastes was probably written, that Solomon realized the futility of such a way of life and that he returned to God. But the Bible does not clearly show that, and we can only be certain

that Solomon is remembered for his wisdom and accomplishments, but not for wise living.

Solomon's lesson for all of us is that wisdom of itself is not as important as wholehearted commitment to God, and that deeds are never as important as dedication.

* Note 1: 1 Kings 6:36 tells us "Solomon built the inner courtyard with three rows of dressed stone and one row of trimmed cedar beams." Interspersing stone with wood in this manner was frequently used in constructing monumental architecture in the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds, as this provided better protection from the earthquakes that were common in these areas. Wood-layered stone shifts more easily without completely falling.

*Note 2: 1 Kings 10:22 shows that Solomon received apes, ivory, and peacocks from Ophir, which must have been far to the east and very possibly India, as the journey there and back took three years.

19. DIVIDED KINGDOMS

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

After the death of Solomon, his son Rehoboam became king of all Israel (1 Kings 11:42-43). But when the people requested relief from the heavy burden of taxes which Solomon had imposed, Rehoboam unwisely refused. Angry at this, the ten northern tribes (all except Benjamin and Judah) chose an unrelated man, Jeroboam, from the tribe of Ephraim as their leader and seceded from the kingdom (1 Kings 12:1-19). Although God promised Jeroboam stability and continuity for the northern tribes if they were obedient, they failed miserably in this.

In order to keep his people from worshiping in Jerusalem where they might be influenced to return to Rehoboam, Jeroboam instituted the worship of golden calves at Bethel and Dan (see Note 1) – in the northern and southern areas of his kingdom – and even brought in new priests and established new holy days to replace those God had given Israel (1 Kings 12:26-33). This foolish act of political expediency led to total apostacy on the part of the northern tribes and their eventual destruction.

Around the time of the division between the northern ten tribes and the southern two tribes (from this point known as the kingdoms of "Israel" and "Judah," respectively), the Egyptian pharaoh Shoshenq I (c. 943–922 BC) – called Shishak in the Bible (1 Kings 11:40; 14:25; and 2 Chronicles 12:2-9) – launched a military campaign against Judah and its surrounding nations in 925 BC. Egyptian texts record this invasion of Shoshenq (see Note 2), and the Bible confirms that he carried out a successful raid against Jerusalem, plundering most of the treasures of the temple built by Solomon.

Before he was made king of the northern tribes, Jeroboam had fled to Egypt to escape Solomon, and Shoshenq had welcomed him there as a potentially useful tool in the power balance of the area. Once Solomon died and Jeroboam returned to Israel to lead the northern tribes, Shoshenq knew that Israel was divided and he was easily able to overcome the two southern tribes. Some Egyptologists feel that the many tons of gold and silver gifted to Egyptian temples in the first years of Shoshenq's successor, Osorkon I, came from Shoshenq's looting of the Jerusalem temple.

After they split, Judah and Israel co-existed for about two centuries with their capitals at Jerusalem and Samaria (see Note 3) respectively. In all, nineteen kings ruled over the "house" or kingdom of Israel, and nineteen kings (plus one queen) ruled over the house of Judah. Sadly, the Bible reports that all the kings of Israel were evil, and of the nineteen kings of Judah we are told that only half of them (Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Amaziah, Azariah, Jotham, Hezekiah, and Josiah) were good – in fact only a couple were consistently good.

It was during this time that God called numerous prophets (to be discussed in the next chapter) and sent them to both kingdoms to reprove their people for their sins and to warn them of punishment and exile if they did not repent. For the most part both kingdoms ignored the warnings, and as a result they no longer enjoyed God's protection and much of the history of both Israel and Judah is fraught with problems, warfare and eventual destruction.

In fact, during their time of co-existence, Israel and Judah often fought against each other and sometimes fought or allied with other nations in the region – a fact for which we have specific archaeological documentation. For example, in the ninth century BC, the kingdom of Israel fought against the nearby kingdom of Moab, and a "stele" or stone monument (now in the Louvre Museum in Paris) created by a Moabite king records this specific conflict.

Israel also allied itself with the rising Mesopotamian power of Assyria – but not without cost. The so-called "Black Obelisk" of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (859-824 BC) claims Israel severed its alliances with Phoenicia and Judah and became subject to Assyria. The obelisk shows the Israelite king, Jehu (c. 841–814 BC) kissing the ground in front of Shalmaneser and presenting a gift of "much silver" to him. The obelisk, now in the British Museum in London, is dated to 841 BC and is the earliest preserved depiction of an Israelite.

Eventually, in the course of their wars, Judah allied with Assyria, while the northern tribes of Israel rebelled against Mesopotamian control and allied with the nearby nation of Aram. As we will see in the following chapters, this situation led to the eventual destruction of Israel by the Assyrians in 723 BC and the destruction of Judah by the Babylonians, in 587-6 BC.

Map of the Divided Kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Image: Bible History Online

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

Rather than focus on deeds of the many evil kings of the divided monarchies, we will look briefly in this section at the reigns of the good kings of Judah – Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Amaziah, Uzziah, Jotham, Hezekiah and Josiah (see Note 4). For the most part, we will not consider the historical aspects of these kings (many of whom have been archaeologically documented), but simply the Bible's assessments of them – in order to reach conclusions in the final section of this chapter.

ASA, "Healer," reigned c. 911- 870 BC. Read chapter 22, "Asa" in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*.

JEHOSHAPHAT, "Yahweh has judged," reigned c. 870 – 849 BC. Like his father, Asa, Jehoshaphat also campaigned against idolatry and – quite remarkably – educated the people in God's laws both by means of traveling teachers he sent out (2 Chronicles 17:7-9) and through his own efforts! (2 Chronicles 19:4). The Bible summarizes his reign very positively: "The Lord

was with Jehoshaphat because he followed the ways of his father David before him ... His heart was devoted to the ways of the Lord" (2 Chronicles 17:3, 6); and "he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord" (2 Chronicles 20:32).

But several times Jehoshaphat made alliances with godless neighbors – including Ahab, one of the very worst kings of Israel. The king also allowed his son to marry Ahab and Jezebel's wicked daughter, Athaliah, who later killed all the descendants of the Davidic line except for the infant Joash, who was kept hidden from her. Jehoshaphat's motivation in these alliances may have been to attempt to heal the rift between the divided kingdoms, but his continuing willingness to ally with evil rulers was wrong, nevertheless.

JOASH or JEHOASH, "Yahweh has given," reigned c. 836–796 BC. Joash was the sole surviving son of King Ahaziah after the massacre of the royal family ordered by his grandmother, the wicked Athaliah. The high priest Jehoiada secretly raised Joash and taught him about God. When Joash was seven years old, Jehoiada led the people in overthrowing Athaliah and crowning Joash as the rightful king. During his reign, Joash restored the temple to its former glory and we are told "Joash did what was right in the eyes of the Lord all the years Jehoiada the priest instructed him. The high places, however, were not removed; the people continued to offer sacrifices and burn incense there" (2 Kings 12:2). As a result, when Jehoida died, Joash turned from God and fell into pagan idol worship, killed the prophet (Jehoida's son!) sent to correct him, and was eventually assassinated by his own people (2 Chronicles 24:17-25).

AMAZIAH, "The strength of Yahweh," reigned 796–767 BC. The son of Joash, Amaziah took the throne after the assassination of his father and reigned for twenty-nine years, twenty-four of which were with the co-regency of his son, Uzziah. Amaziah's reign is summarized by the Chronicler as "he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, but not wholeheartedly" (2 Chronicles 25:2). We see the reason for this mixed message in the way Amaziah followed God's word in not executing the children of his father's murderers, but took the idols of his enemies and worshiped them after victory in battle! (2 Chronicles 25:3-4, 14).

UZZIAH, "Yahweh is my strength," reigned c. 790 – 739 BC. Uzziah (known as Azariah, 1 Kings 15:1-7) was one of Amaziah's sons (2 Chronicles

26:1). He became king at the age of 16 and reigned for about fifty-two years. His long reign was the most successful since that of Solomon, and he seems to have been guided by a priest or prophet named Zechariah. The prophets Hosea, Isaiah, Amos, and Jonah also functioned during his reign, and Uzziah was faithful to God for many years. We are told that Uzziah "sought God during the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God. As long as he sought the LORD, God gave him success" (2 Chronicles 26:5). But later, when Zechariah died, Uzziah became prideful and burned incense in the temple, which only the priests were permitted to do. As a result, God afflicted the king with leprosy, and his son Jotham governed the people as co-regent for eight years until his father died (2 Kings 15:5, 7; 2 Chronicles 26:16 - 27:1).

JOTHAM, "Yahweh is perfect," reigned c. 758–743 BC. The son of King Uzziah, Jotham ruled well and we are told that "He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord" and that he "grew powerful because he walked steadfastly before the LORD his God" (2 Chronicles 27:2, 6), although he failed to remove the local high places used for idol worship and the people continued their idolatrous practices (2 Kings 15:35).

Isaiah, Hosea, and Micah all prophesied during Jotham's reign (Isaiah 1:1; Hosea 1:1; Micah 1:1), but their prophecies were directed against the people rather than their king. In fact, the Bible nowhere records Jotham as having committed a single sin. Such a situation is a rarity among even the most righteous kings of Judah, but reading between the lines we see that although Jotham himself led a pious life, there is no concrete evidence of his concern for the spiritual condition of his people.

It is clear that during the king's reign the corruption of the Northern Kingdom began to enter Judah, as we see in the words of Isaiah and Micah. Hosea's references to Judah also indicate that under Jotham's reign there was a lack of righteousness in the lives and worship of his people. Perhaps we see the same truth in the fact that despite Jotham's personal godliness, his son Ahaz was an extremely wicked king.

HEZEKIAH, "My strength is Yahweh," reigned c. 716–697 BC. Read chapter 23 "Hezekiah" in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*.

JOSIAH, "Yahweh has healed," reigned c. 640 to 609 BC. Read chapter 24 "Josiah" in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

When we read the biblical accounts of the kings of Judah and Israel, as summarized above, we see several important patterns. First, of course, we see that the only good kings were from Judah. Of these few good kings, only a *very* few were very good! At a practical level we see another pattern. The average length of reign of the good kings was thirty-four years and the average of the wicked kings was only about half that – eighteen years. Many kings of Israel were killed or committed suicide, while only two of Judah's nineteen kings were killed – one of them for his evil behavior. God's promises of blessing on kings who followed him were clearly fulfilled in a physical as well as spiritual manner.

The next pattern we find is that in summarizing the reigns of the various monarchs, the Bible uses a consistent benchmark: the example of King David – who was himself far from perfect, yet whose attitude of ongoing repentance and unfailing desire to please God made his life the standard by which other kings were judged. In this way, it was said of each good king, such as Asa, that he: "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as his father David had done" (1 Kings 15:11; etc.), while of unrighteous or mediocre kings such as Abijah it was said that "his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his forefather had been" (1 Kings 15:1-4; etc.).

The assessment is not general, however, and is often very carefully worded. Of Amaziah, for example, we are told: "He *did what was right* in the eyes of the Lord, *but not as* his *father David* had done" (2 Kings 14:3, emphasis added here and below), showing a mix of success and failure in following God's ways. And we should notice how the very best of the kings were assessed: of Hezekiah we are told "He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, *just as* his father David had done" (2 Kings 18:3), and of Josiah, "He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and *followed completely* the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left" (2 Kings 22:2).

Other characteristics of the good kings are sometimes mentioned, such as following the law or being devoted to God, but comparison to David is the only consistent metric of judgment used by the Bible in assessing the kings because the Bible viewed them all from the perspective of the promised "Son of the Most High" who would eventually rule on David's throne (Luke 1:32).

There is a final pattern involved in the Bible's discussion of the kings of Judah and Israel that ties directly to the messianic promise given to David. The book of Kings uses a specific formula for discussing the reigns of the kings who ruled after the division of Solomon's kingdom. For each of the twenty kings of Judah and the twenty kings of Israel, this formula lists such things as the year the king came to the throne, the length of his reign and a summary of the good and bad aspects of the king's rule.

Additionally, the formula gives us the name of the father of each of the kings – and in some cases, the name of the mother. The listing of kings' mothers may seem random until we realize there is a distinct and important pattern in which women are listed. No mother is listed for a single king of Israel, but the mothers of all the kings of Judah are given – except for two.

It is in this fact that we see the significance of the listing of royal mothers. The two kings of Judah whose mothers are not listed are the wicked Joram (Jehoram) and Ahaz. Not only were these kings particularly godless, but also the book of Kings summarizes their reigns in exactly the same way – that they: "walked in the way of the kings of Israel" (2 Kings 8:18; 16:3 and see Note 5). In other words, we are not told of the mothers of the only two kings of Judah who completely disqualified themselves from rule because they acted like kings of Israel, just as we are not told of the mothers of all the wicked kings of Israel itself.

This fact indicates that the royal mothers were viewed as a vital *symbolic* as well as biological part of the Davidic dynastic line – a perspective that begins with the promise of Eve's "seed" (Genesis 3:15), continues throughout the stories of the kings, and eventually surfaces in the genealogy of Jesus that is recorded through his mother Mary (Luke 3:23-38 – see Note 6).

For the most part, the history of the kings of both Judah and Israel was a litany of unwise, disobedient, and corrupt kings, but their stories show the two sides of God's nature in working through these individuals: his justice and his grace. God's justice is seen in that he repeatedly warned the kings of punishment if they did not repent and eventually brought destruction on them and the people who followed their example, as we will see in the next chapters of this book.

But God's grace is also seen in the fact that a number of kings – even some of the not-so-good ones – were ancestors of Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:9), the fact that God forgave them when they turned from their mistakes, and the fact that the stories of the very best kings of Judah provided glimpses of what the reign of the promised messianic King would be like.

Although these human kings all failed to measure up to that goal, the mention of the king's mother at the beginning of the story of every Judean king except the very worst reminds us that the potential was there and would continue until the promised seed finally came.

Ultimately, just as the book of Judges shows repeatedly that the people of Israel needed a king to guide and rule them, the books of Kings and Chronicles show repeatedly that it could not be just any king – that a perfect King was needed to fulfill the perfect promises made to David.

* Note 1: Archaeological excavations at Dan have discovered the high place constructed by Jeroboam for the golden calf erected there. The sanctuary complex included a large altar in an open-air courtyard.

* Note 2: The Egyptian records of Shoshenq's invasion include a stela found at Megiddo in Israel as well as celebratory texts on the Bubastite Portal at Karnak in Upper Egypt, and reliefs on the walls of a small temple of Amun at el-Hibeh in central Egypt.

*Note 3: The northern tribes of Israel had two short-lived capitals at Shechem and Tirzah, but then established a capital at Samaria, where it remained for the duration of the northern kingdom's existence.

* Note 4: Most of Judah's and Israel's kings had "theophoric" names – names containing a reference to God – so the many kings whose names began with "Ja," or "Jo" or ended with "iah" all reflected the name Yah or Yahweh – for example, Abijah ("Yah is my father"). However, only a very few of those kings attempted to honor that name.

* Note 5: In the same way, following in the path of David and not in that of the kings of Israel is the Bible's assessment of Jehoshaphat: "The LORD was with Jehoshaphat because he followed the example of his father David's earlier days and … sought the God of his father, followed His commandments, and did not act as Israel did" (2 Chronicles 17:3-4).

* Note 6: The genealogy given in Luke 3 ends with Jesus' nominal human father, Joseph, but is actually the genealogy of Mary. This is because, with no brothers, Mary's inheritance right of kingship would legally pass to her husband, and Joseph's father-in-law Heli would be counted as his "father." There was no specific word in New Testament Greek for "father-in-law."

20. THE PROPHETS

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The prophetic books of the Bible represent the central section (the *Nevi'im*) of the Hebrew Scriptures and the final section ("the Prophets") of the more chronologically organized Old Testament used by Christians. Unfortunately, these prophetic writings are often the least read books of the Old Testament by many Christians. This is due to the unusual and occasionally difficult "symbolic" language found in some of the prophetic books and the perception of many Bible readers that these books are mainly condemnations of those who reject God or warnings against God's people going astray.

The matter of symbolic language can be easily overcome, and nothing could really be further from the truth than that the prophets are primarily condemnatory. In fact, as we will see in this chapter, the prophetic books often contain as much *encouragement* as they do correction, and they are by far the richest source of information about the promised Messiah in the whole Old Testament. However, we need certain background information in order to fully appreciate what the prophetic books can give us.

First, we need some basic terminology. The biblical prophets are sometimes categorized as the "verbal" prophets (those like Elijah and Elisha who delivered their messages orally but did not leave any written books) and the "writing" prophets, who composed the prophetic books that are found in the Old Testament. These books are categorized in different ways. In the Hebrew Bible, they are grouped into the "Former Prophets" (the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) and the "Latter Prophets" (the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve "minor" prophets (together in one book).

In English versions of the Bible, the prophetic books are divided into the "Major Prophets" (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel) and the "Minor Prophets" (separated into individual books: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi). Finally, the Hebrew prophets were either "earlier" or "later" and "pre-exilic," "exilic," or "post-exilic," according to when they prophesied, relative to the captivity and exile of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

To understand the prophets and their work, it is helpful to realize that the Hebrew word for prophet is *nabi*, which is thought to derive either from the verb "to bubble up," like a fountain, with the meaning "to declare," or, alternately, to mean "one called," or "one who calls." The ancient Septuagint version of the Old Testament translated the Hebrew word *nabi* with the Greek word *prophetes* (from which we get our word "prophet"), meaning "one who speaks for another, especially one who speaks for a god" indicating the likelihood of the first of the possible meanings of the Hebrew word.

In any case, a prophet was primarily a messenger of God or other gods and, as the Bible affirms, there were many "false prophets" who either spoke what was not true or spoke on behalf of false gods. The Old Testament case of Balaam, the prophet who was hired to curse Israel (Numbers 22-23) provides an example of yet another type – a professional prophet who spoke in the name of the true God (Numbers 22:18; 23:1-3; etc.), but who did not seem to follow him (2 Peter 2:16; Jude 1:11).

The prophets used by God were both male and female. Jewish tradition says there were seven female prophets, of whom the greatest were Moses' sister Miriam, the judge Deborah, and the prophet Huldah (see chapter 17 "Huldah" in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*).

Of the many male prophets, Moses was counted as being of great importance, yet the Bible tells us that prophecy *per se* began with Samuel (Acts 3:24), as we will soon see. Samuel was the first of the professional prophets who included Nathan and Gad in the time of the united monarchy, as well as Elijah, Elisha, and many others in the time of the divided monarchy. These prophets are the focus of this chapter, and to understand them we must understand the specific roles to which they were called – and their surprisingly unique nature in the ancient Near East.

A primary role of the Hebrew prophets within the overall category of being "messengers of God" was that of being kingmakers. We have seen that both Saul and David were anointed king by the prophet Samuel – which is one of the reasons the prophets "began" with him and ended after the exile and the downfall of the kings. In the broader ancient Near East, no prophets are known to have played the same role as the Israelite prophet kingmakers.

The Hebrew prophets also acted as royal advisors. Until Samuel, prophets had exercised political leadership, but with the beginning of kingship the role of the prophet became an advisory one. In this capacity the Hebrew prophets guided and sometimes encouraged the kings, but

also, when necessary, sternly rebuked them (often at their own risk – Joash; etc.), as we saw with Samuel and Saul, and Nathan and David. This was a unique function. Usually, prophecies in other Near Eastern cultures simply encouraged the monarch regarding general duties such as ruling with justice or promised him good fortune such as victory in his battles.

Often the role of correcting the people was secondary for the prophets to the roles associated with the king, though some of the later prophets were sent primarily to the people themselves. What is clear is that the Hebrew prophets frequently criticized their own people – especially for the dual sins of elevating images to divine status (idolatry) and reducing humans to less than human status (oppression of the poor; etc.). Once again, this function was virtually unknown in other cultures in the ancient Near East.

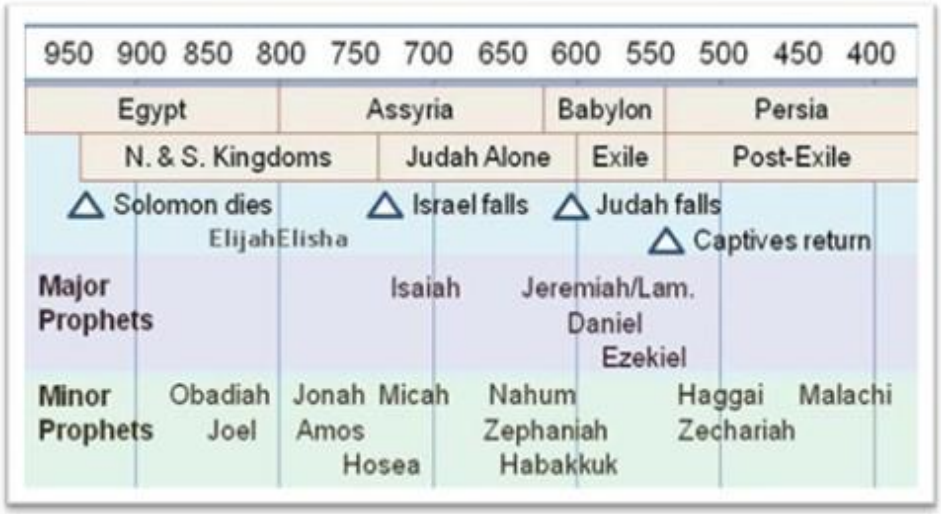
Finally, of course, in addition to the "forthtelling" of various messages of guidance and correction, the prophets were often inspired to make predictions – to participate in "foretelling." This was in fact, their most lasting and important role, and although every biblical prophet gave predictive messages of this type, one of the most important things we can keep in mind is that every prophet's message was unique in some way.

We tend to think of "prophets" as being essentially similar, somewhat like the twelve disciples of the New Testament, but although many prophets condemned the same sins and warned of the same punishments, each had a unique message, as we will see.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

We have already studied the prophet Samuel and also discussed Nathan and Gad in earlier chapters of this book. In this section we will look at the most important prophets who ministered through the era of the divided kingdom up to the exile: Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and nine of the twelve so-called "Minor Prophets."

Although there was overlap between the ministries of several of these prophets and similarities in what some of them said, each prophet had a unique message which was given in a characteristic manner and recognizing the unique nature of what they said – and how they said it – is often a key aspect in successfully understanding the messages of these servants of God.



Timeline of Elijah and Elisha and the Major and Minor Prophets.
Image: Adapted from Slideplayer.com

ELIJAH, "Yahweh is my God," prophesied c. 850-800 BC. The narratives concerning Elijah and Elisha contain a number of unique elements, including the miracles they performed that are without parallel among the other prophets. In addition to declaring a number of predictive prophecies that came to pass (1 Kings 21:22-23; etc.), Elijah performed a number of dramatic miracles such as causing the rain to cease and start again three and a half years later (1 Kings 17:1; 18:45), calling down fire from heaven numerous times (1 Kings 18:38; etc.), parting the Jordan River (2 Kings 2:8), and the resurrection of a widow's son (1 Kings 17:22). Some of these miracles foreshadowed those of Christ (see Note 1), and the spectacular end to Elijah's ministry – ascending in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11) – also foreshadowed Christ's own ascension. The prophet Malachi foretold that God would send Elijah again (Malachi 4:5) and, not surprisingly, many people felt that Christ was the Elijah who was to come again (Matthew 16:13-14).

ELISHA, "Yahweh is my salvation," prophesied c. 800-750 BC. The ministry of Elisha, who followed Elijah with a double portion of the "mantle" of that prophet, was also notable in that Elisha not only duplicated a number of the miracles of the earlier prophet (such as parting the Jordan, 2 Kings 2:14, and resurrecting the Shunammite woman's son, 2 Kings 4:34), but also performed *twice* as many miracles as Elijah had done. Yet

Elisha also had his own clearly distinct role and message, and a number of his miracles were unique (2 Kings 6:18-20; etc.). Many of these miracles foreshadow the miracles of Christ – as when Elisha healed a man from leprosy (see Note 1). Elisha's feeding of a crowd with a limited number of loaves of bread (2 Kings 4:42-44) certainly foreshadowed Jesus doing the same thing (Matthew 14:13-21).

ISAIAH, "Yahweh is salvation," was active c. 740-700 BC (see Note 2). Isaiah was without doubt the most significant of all the Hebrew prophets. The book of Isaiah is cited more than any other in the New Testament and is also represented among the Dead Sea Scrolls more than all the other prophetic texts combined. Isaiah still continues to be among the most influential biblical writers for Christians today.

Isaiah's superlative literary style indicates that he was from a well-educated background, and Jewish tradition says he was of royal descent and may have been a cousin of King Uzziah. This would have given Isaiah great access to the kings of Judah with whom he interacted; Isaiah served as counsel to King Hezekiah (c. 727–698 BC) during the period in which the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, waged war against Judah. Nevertheless, Isaiah often criticized the ruling classes for their corruption and oppression of the poor, and ancient records claim that he was eventually martyred in the reign of the evil king Manasseh.

Because different sections of the book of Isaiah seem to be written from different time perspectives, many scholars feel that it is actually the work of two or even three different writers: "First Isaiah" (chapters 1-39) – composed by the eighth century BC prophet Isaiah; "Second Isaiah" (chapters 40–55) – the work of an anonymous sixth century BC writer during the exile; and "Third Isaiah" (chapters 56–66) – by another anonymous individual writing after the Jews' return from exile. Ultimately, the single or multiple authorship of the book of Isaiah cannot be decisively proven (see Note 3), but in either case the importance of the work remains the same and its message is not affected.

A clear dual message of judgment and hope runs throughout Isaiah: along with warnings of punishment for Israel's sinful and rebellious ways, there is an equally strong theme of hope for the future (see chapter 6 "Isaiah" in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*).

The book of Isaiah is often called the "Fifth Gospel" because no other prophet gives so many prophecies regarding a future servant of God who would suffer and die for others (Isaiah 53; etc.), but who will one day rule

over a new Jerusalem and Israel and who will establish God's kingdom over all the nations of the earth, forever (Isaiah 60; etc.). Without Isaiah we would not have the clear prophetic picture of a Messiah who would be both human *and* divine, who would suffer *and* who would reign in glory! These inspiring prophecies form the very core of our understanding of the role of God's Messiah – they are the basis of works such as Handel's wonderful "Messiah" oratorio and have been a source of hope for readers of the Bible for over twenty-five centuries. No other writer of the Old Testament conveys so much hope as Isaiah.

JEREMIAH, "Yahweh will raise up," was active c. 630-570 BC. The son of a priest from a small rural village in Judah, Jeremiah's words were recorded by his scribe and disciple Baruch son of Neriah (see Note 4). Although simply written for the most part, Jeremiah contains some unusual aspects (see Note 5) and word-plays. For example, when God asks Jeremiah what he sees in his first vision, the prophet replies "I see the branch of an almond [Hebrew *shaqed*] tree." God replies: "You have seen correctly, for I am watching [Hebrew *shoqed*] to see that my word is fulfilled" (Jeremiah 1:11-12). This technique helped reinforce the prophet's message and is certainly unusual, but the book of Jeremiah is unique in the degree to which it gives us an insight into the emotions and feelings of the prophet himself.

Often persecuted, Jeremiah had a difficult ministry and was frequently discouraged, but – as a result – many parts of the book that bears his name are encouraging to those who suffer. Mostly, however, Jeremiah's emotions are regarding the sins of the people of Israel and the punishment they would inevitably bring upon themselves as a result. This compassion for the people to whom he was sent is clear throughout the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations (also authored by Jeremiah) and is the reason for his being referred to as "the weeping prophet."

But this emotionality is not only an aspect of Jeremiah's own personality but is also the clearest example in the Bible of God's anguish and sorrow for his wayward people. Jeremiah gives us, in this sense, a view into the mind of God regarding the punishments he must justly bring about. Equally unique is Jeremiah's detailed portrayal of the new covenant God would utilize to restore his relationship directly with his people – rather than through a temple – and to write his law within them rather than on tablets of stone (Jeremiah 31:31–34).

THE MINOR PROPHETS. The twelve so-called "Minor Prophets" are named so only because their books are much shorter works than those of the "Major Prophets," such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. Nine of these twelve minor prophets functioned before the exile (see chapters 28-36 "Hosea"-"Zephaniah" in *Discovering the Bible*), and each has an important and unique message, though they cannot be considered individually here. The three remaining minor prophets will be discussed in the following chapters.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

There are many theological concepts that can be drawn out from the writings of the prophets, but the most fundamental one is the principle of prophetic duality that can be found in the prophetic books we have looked at in this chapter. Prophetic duality refers to the fact that a great many predictive prophecies have a prior and a later fulfillment – a near and a distant application. Thus, many of the predictions of the pre-exilic prophets regarding the future restoration of Israel after the exile saw a prior physical fulfillment in the return of the Jews to their homeland and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple, as we will see in the coming chapters. But there are aspects of this restoration that were not fulfilled at that time and will only be fulfilled at some future time under the reign of a divine King.

This is a basic principle, but the key to understanding the writings of the prophets is to realize that their statements can move back and forth, as it were – between the near fulfillment and the distant one – in the same chapter, the same paragraph, and even the same verse. For example, in Isaiah 32:10-14 the prophet states that in "little more than a year" the land and fortresses of Judah would be afflicted and deserted. This happened when the Assyrians invaded Judah and destroyed much of it, although the Jews were not yet taken into captivity. However, the next few verses (Isaiah 32:15-20), which continue without a break, describe a time when "the Spirit is poured on us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field," in what is clearly a distant future.

A great many of Isaiah's oracles – and those of other prophets – jump back and forth in this way between descriptions of contemporary and soon-to-be events and a future that would see the fall of Jerusalem, the eventual end of Assyria and Babylon, the restoration of Israel and Judah from exile, and a yet further future in which full restoration would come under the rule of God. Often the prophets will speak of future events in this way while

"skipping over" long sections of time. It is as if the prophets were given a view of different mountain peaks stretching into the distance; they recorded the peaks they could see, but not the valleys – no matter how wide – between them.

This concept of prior and later fulfillment is the basis of our understanding of the prophecies regarding the promised Messiah and must also be applied to prophecies in different books of the Old Testament as well as within the same books. Thus, Isaiah 53, which tells us that the Messiah would be "pierced for our transgressions" (Isaiah 53:5) is clearly speaking of the Messiah's first coming, while in Psalm 45 we see a reference to the Messiah's coming as a conquering King with great majesty and power (Psalm 45:4-5).

It is only when we distinguish the humble servant role of the Messiah's first coming from his role as conquering King at his second coming that we understand in proper perspective the different "peaks" of history seen by the prophets. Many of the prophets speak of both events, but generally we read of the Messiah's first coming in books such as Micah and Isaiah and his return in the books of Zechariah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. But all the prophets give distinctive glimpses and foreshadowings of the promised Messiah in either their actions or their writings. These are the greatest things we can find in these books, and ones that can continually enrich our study of them.

* Note 1: There are many parallels between the ministries of Elijah and Elisha and that of Jesus. Matthew 15:21-28 tells how Jesus traveled to the Phoenician area of Tyre and Sidon and healed the daughter of a gentile woman, just as Elijah had traveled to Phoenicia and raised up a widow's son in the city of Sidon (1 Kings 17:7-24). In Matthew 8:5-13, we find that Jesus also healed the servant of the Roman centurion, just as Elisha healed the Syrian king's servant Naaman (2 Kings 5:1-13). Both were not only gentiles, but Naaman was also an officer of Israel's enemy Syria, just as the centurion was an officer of Judea's enemy Rome. These two healings by Jesus – the only clearly gentile individuals recorded as being healed by him – are directly parallel to the Old Testament examples of Elijah and Elisha that Jesus himself cited regarding his own ministry (Luke 4:24-27).

* Note 2: Isaiah is archaeologically attested in the form of a likely seal of the prophet found in excavations in Jerusalem in 2009.

* Note 3: Although the multiple authorship view of Isaiah is widely accepted, the New Testament appears to quote the later chapters of the book as the words of the prophet (Matthew 12:17-21; Romans 10:16; etc.). There are also a number of

characteristic expressions that are used throughout the book (such as "the Holy One of Israel" which occurs twenty-one times in Isaiah, yet only six times in the rest of the Old Testament). On the other hand, it is interesting that Jesus himself only referred to passages from what is called First Isaiah as written by Isaiah (Matthew 13:14-15; etc.) and when he refers to passages from what would be Second and Third Isaiah, he simply states that "It is written" (Matthew 21:13; etc.) or calls the passages "Scripture" (Luke 4:21) or describes them as "written in the Prophets" (John 6:45). It is also interesting that the "Great Isaiah Scroll" found among the Dead Sea Scrolls and dating to about 150 years before the time of Christ, has an intentional gap around the part of the scroll (chapter 40) that is the point at which First Isaiah is claimed to change to Second Isaiah – which could indicate that the copyist of the scroll was aware that the latter part of Isaiah was a separate composition.

* Note 4: Seal impressions with the name of "Baruch son of Neriah, the scribe" have been found in Jerusalem in recent years.

* Note 5: For example, Jeremiah contains a number of encrypted words in which the first letter of the alphabet is used to substitute for the last and so on (in English, ABC would be written ZYX). For example, Jeremiah 25:26 states that the king of "Sheshak" will drink the cup of God's wrath, where "Sheshak" is an encryption of "Babylon."

21. DOWNFALL AND EXILE

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

After warning his people through his prophets for many years, God finally removed his protection from the nations of ancient Judah and Israel and allowed their enemies to overthrow them. Beginning in approximately 735 BC, the brutally dominant Mesopotamian power of Assyria under the king the Bible calls "Pull" (Tiglath-Pileser III – 745-727 BC) invaded the northern kingdom, captured many of its cities and began to deport the captive Israelites (2 Kings 15:29). The attacks continued until 722 BC when Samaria, the capital city of the northern kingdom of Israel, was finally taken by the Assyrian king, Sargon II, after a three-year siege, and the Israelite population was removed to areas controlled by the Assyrians and their allies the Medes, neighbors of the Persians (2 Kings 17:3-6).

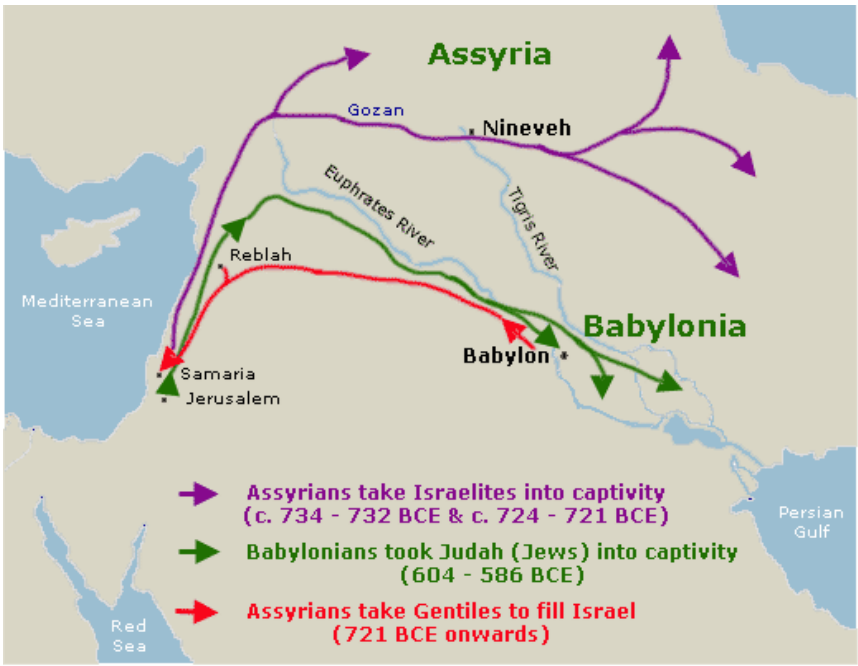
Forcible relocation of conquered peoples was a common practice of the Mesopotamian powers of Assyria and Babylonia, as the populations they captured were unable to continue to resist effectively and also provided a valuable workforce for their captors. Such deportations were not usually complete, at least initially, however. At first the conquering nations would remove members of the royal families – often taking them hostage – and key government officials and military leaders. Later, if necessary, they would remove more of the population – especially the skilled workers and educated classes. Finally, as when Assyria overthrew Samaria, they might take more of the population, leaving only the very poor and uneducated to work the land. The Assyrians then moved people from other areas into the territory of Israel, and they, along with the few remaining people in the land, became the mixed population called in the New Testament "Samaritans."

Although they destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel, the Assyrians did not conquer the southern kingdom of Judah. Both the Bible and ancient Assyrian texts describe how the Assyrian king Sennacherib (704-681 BC) laid siege to Jerusalem in 701 BC, but God honored the humble attitude of the Jews led by King Hezekiah, and the Assyrian forces withdrew (they claim) after Hezekiah agreed to pay a ransom that included a large amount of gold, silver, ivory, elephant hides, and even the king's own daughters.

The Bible states that after a large part of the Assyrian army left to fight an approaching Egyptian force that was coming to the aid of Jerusalem, the "angel of the Lord" killed the remaining Assyrian soldiers (2 Kings 19:35). Not surprisingly, the Assyrian records do not mention such a divine decimation of their forces, or even the way they were threatened by the Egyptian forces, but they do brag that Sennacherib trapped Hezekiah, king of Judah, in Jerusalem "like a bird in a cage" – providing clear historical evidence for the biblical story of the siege of Jerusalem (Sennacherib Prism text).

As we saw in the previous chapters, after Hezekiah's godly rule the people of Judah returned to their evil ways and ultimately, almost a century after Sennacherib's unsuccessful siege of Jerusalem, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II overthrew the Assyrian Empire and began to deport many of the Jews to Babylon. In 587 BC he captured Jerusalem and, just as the prophets had warned, the Babylonians looted and destroyed the temple of Solomon along with much of the city, tearing down many of its walls and deporting more of Judah's inhabitants to Babylonia (Jeremiah 52:16). Once again, we have historical confirmation of these events described in the Bible in the form of Babylonian records written during Nebuchadnezzar's reign, although it is not known what happened at this time to the ark of the covenant, which contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments. Some ancient writers say the ark was taken to Babylon, while others claim that it was hidden away by the Jewish priests before the city fell. In any event, the ark was lost, and the era of the First Temple ended.

As for the Jewish captives who were deported to Babylon, we have both biblical and historical records and even archaeological evidence. Although it was a time of deep national mourning and introspection for many, it is clear that the Jewish people began to adapt to captivity and to adopt many aspects of the language and culture of their captors. Almost two hundred inscribed clay tablets have been discovered in modern Iraq (the area of ancient Babylonia) that reveal details of the lives of Jewish deportees who lived at one village called Al-Yahuda, meaning the "village of the Jews." These tablets pick up the story where the Bible leaves off. They were written by Babylonian scribes on behalf of the Jewish families that lived in the area and show that the exiles and their descendants had adopted the local language and the social and legal traditions of Babylonia a relatively short time after their arrival there. In this respect, the exiled Jews were following the instruction of the prophet Jeremiah in a letter he sent to them from Judah around 597 BC (Jeremiah 29:1-7).



The Captivities of Israel and Judah. Image: Adapted from a Legacy image.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

LAMENTATIONS. We looked at Jeremiah's prophetic role and activity before the exile in the last chapter of this book. Here we want to briefly comment on the book of Lamentations that the prophet composed in memory of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian forces. Despite its somber subject, Lamentations is a work of literary and poetic skill and helps us understand the traumatic nature of the destruction the Babylonians brought about. Interestingly, the book is typical of a Mesopotamian genre of poems lamenting the downfall of great cities such as the "Lament Over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur," which usually imply that cities rise and fall without ascribing reason or blame for such events. Lamentations, however, places the blame for Jerusalem's demise squarely on the shoulders of the Jewish people for their sins and refusal to heed God's warnings (Lamentations 2; etc.), but does so with great compassion and sadness for what the people had brought upon themselves.

To understand why the Babylonians so thoroughly destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, we must realize that in the ancient world political and religious issues – as we would say, "church and state" – were not separated

as they are for us, so capturing the enemy's "god" was just as important as capturing the enemy king, and conquering armies frequently destroyed their enemies' temples and carried away the statues of the gods to take their power for themselves. This is why Lamentations speaks of the temple being completely broken up and torn down as well as the city – "both king and priest" (Lamentations 2:6-7). The book ends with a prayer for restitution that would be promised and confirmed by the prophets who came after Jeremiah.

EZEKIEL, "God's strength" or "God will strengthen," was a priest who became a prophet. He was taken into exile along with some ten thousand Jews who had been sent to Babylonia from Jerusalem in the first wave of deportations in 605 BC (2 Kings 24:14-16). We can see two distinct periods in Ezekiel's ministry. In the first period, from the initial deportation to the final destruction of Jerusalem (c. 598-587 BC), Ezekiel's prophecies centered on denunciations of the people's sins and predictions of impending defeat. In the second period, after the fall of Jerusalem (c. 587-571 BC), the prophet's tone changed, and Ezekiel began to stress God's mercy and forgiveness – thus inspiring hope and strength in the exiles.

The ministry of all the major prophets began with a theophany or vision of God, and Ezekiel's is particularly powerful and describes God as traveling on a wheeled throne or chariot (Ezekiel 1, see Note 1) pulled by beings whose description is very similar to the winged human-headed and animal-headed creatures found in the palace decorations and sculptures of Mesopotamia. In fact, the social and cultural aspects of Ezekiel's Babylonian setting can help us to better understand much of what the prophet wrote. For example, Ezekiel's description of the sinful religious practices of the Israelites is colored heavily by the events of the pagan Babylonian Ishtar festival, and many of the expressions and allusions the prophet uses are to be found in the literature of ancient Babylonia (see Note 2).

Ezekiel is also given complex acting assignments (Ezekiel 4-5; etc.) to portray some of his messages, just as Isaiah (Isaiah 20) and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 19) also were, but the stress on the visions Ezekiel received is unique among prophets up to his time, although such visions become increasingly common among prophets from his time forward. Ezekiel's vision of God departing the temple in Jerusalem (Ezekiel 10) was particularly important to the theology of his message, as was his extended vision of a future temple (Ezekiel 40-47) to which God's glory returns.

These visions and that of the "valley of dry bones," regarding a future resurrection of God's people (Ezekiel 37:1-14), provided particular hope to the exiled Jews.

DANIEL, "God is my Judge," was a young Jewish noble who was taken into captivity by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar and trained – as many educated and promising captives were – for service to the king and his successor Belshazzar (Daniel 1:3-5; 5:1). Such preparation enabled the brightest captives to act as scribes, advisors, diplomats, and civil servants of various types. The normal length of time taken to train a scribe was three years, and interestingly this is the length of time Daniel 1:5 tells us was required for Daniel and his friends. Whatever the specific role that was given to Daniel, he distinguished himself in his royal service by his wisdom (see Note 3), his ability to interpret signs (see Note 4), and also his faithfulness to the One God. During this time he began to receive visions from God. Chapters 1-6 of the book of Daniel contain stories about Daniel and his companions, while chapters 7-12 contain his prophetic visions regarding the near, distant, and far distant futures.

As a result of political infighting, the Babylonian Empire began to decline after Nebuchadnezzar's death, and when the Persian king Cyrus invaded Babylonia in 539 BC he was welcomed by the population of Babylon as a liberating king. Some time later, however, Babylon rebelled, and the city was reconquered by the Persian king Darius (Daniel 5:30-31). The empire established by Cyrus would continue for some two hundred years before being defeated by Alexander the Great, and this and later events are the subjects of the visions of world-ruling empires found in Daniel 7-12. Daniel's royal service extended for over sixty-five years, but while Ezra 8:2 mentions a priest named Daniel who went from Babylon to Jerusalem with a group that eventually returned with Ezra, it is not known if this was the same Daniel.

Strangely, the book of Daniel occasionally has Daniel speaking in the first person, though the narratives mainly discuss him in the third person using his Hebrew name Daniel or the name given to him by the Babylonians, Belteshazzar ("May [the god] Bel protect his life"). Also, while Daniel 1:1 - 2:3 and 8:1 - 12:13 are written in Hebrew, Daniel 2:4 - 7:28 is written in Aramaic, the language most used in Babylonia. The book also uses many expressions that show its Babylonian and Persian background. For example, the divine title "God of heaven" (Daniel 2:19) was a popular title used for several gods in the sixth century BC, and one which the Jews

in Babylon found acceptable to use for God. In the same way, Nebuchadnezzar's declaration that the figure he saw in the furnace with Daniel's friends was like "the Son of God" (Daniel 3:25 KJV) is literally a "son of the gods," a common Babylonian expression for a supernatural being. Although the book of Daniel has some puzzling aspects, its authentic setting in its time and place are clear.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

The story of the fall of Israel and Judah – God's "chosen" people – and their subsequent captivities is one that raises several theological questions. People sometimes ask how a good and kind God could punish cities and nations by bringing the kind of destruction upon them that Jerusalem experienced. The truth is that God usually does not bring such things, but people bring them on themselves. The relatively small nation of ancient Israel always existed between greater powers that threatened its existence through most of its history. God graciously protected the people of Israel from their aggressive neighbors for centuries, but when his people began to rebel against him and completely ignored his warnings, he finally removed the protection he had promised to give if they would be obedient. At that point Israel and Judah became just like the nations around them in being unprotected from captivity and exile.

People also sometimes claim that the destruction of Judah and its kingship shows that God broke his promise to David that he would always have a descendant on his throne forever (2 Samuel 7:16, 1 Chronicles 17:11-12). However, there were conditional and unconditional parts to that promise. When God told David that he would establish his throne forever, he also stipulated that if his son sinned, he would "punish him with a rod wielded by men" (2 Samuel 7:14). The stipulation referred not only to David's son Solomon, but also to David's later descendants who became king. As we have seen, God's warning came true when Solomon was punished by having his kingdom fragmented, and later rulers were punished when God allowed Judah and Israel's enemies to attack and eventually carry them into exile. But the prophetic books we have looked at make it clear that the end of Judah's kingship was not the result of God's failing to keep his promises, but a necessary manifestation of God's justice. Despite his people's failures, God maintained his determination to guide history in order to fulfill his promises: David's male descendants continued down through the centuries to Jesus, as the New Testament Gospels show

(Matthew 1:1-17, Luke 3:23–38), and Jesus would qualify through obedience to become the perfect King in whom God's promises to David could be fulfilled (Luke 1:32-33).

The later prophets – especially Jeremiah – also reframed ancient Judah's understanding of God's true desires for his people. Rather than being content with the outward religious rituals that his people had begun to rely on, God showed through Jeremiah that true religion is inward in character and not based on any temple or physical ritual (Jeremiah 31:33). Although they did not listen when Jeremiah offered this truth, as the exile progressed the people of Judah came to understand and appreciate it. Daniel built on this concept when he stressed that our relationship with God is made possible by his grace, not our own religious works: "We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy" (Daniel 9:18). As we will see in the next chapter, when the Jews were finally able to return to their homeland, these understandings began to revolutionize their religion and to set the stage for the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament.

* Note 1: What many translations call the "eyes" seen by Ezekiel on the wheels beneath the throne of God refer to oval shaped precious stones that were often set into royal thrones (see also Ezekiel 10:9).

*Note 2: For example, Ezekiel uses images and ideas from the Mesopotamian poem "Erra and Ishum," a graphic story of warfare, that was extant in Babylonia before and during the time of the Jewish exile.

* Note 3: The Book of Ezekiel mentions a Daniel renowned for his wisdom (Ezekiel 14:14, 20; 28:3), but it is not known if this is the same individual as the Daniel of the biblical book of that name.

* Note 4: The inscription that appeared on the wall of the king's palace: *mene, mene, tekel, parsin* (Daniel 5:25), was difficult for the king's wise men to interpret because each word is both a noun and a verb, so the four words could be interpreted different ways. Daniel skillfully interpreted each word – in some cases with both meanings – to give the explanation he did.

22. RETURN AND REBUILDING

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

"I am the LORD ... who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt,"and of the temple, "Let its foundations be laid"' (Isaiah 44:24, 28).

Many students of the Bible do not realize what a unique event it was when the Achaemenid Persian king Cyrus conquered Babylon and fulfilled this prophecy of Isaiah. Normally, in the ancient world, people groups and nations attacked their neighbors for strategic reasons – to preemptively guarantee their own safety, or for the riches they felt they could acquire from weaker neighbors. Cyrus did neither.

In the middle of the seventh century BC, around the time Jeremiah was prophesying in Judah, a new religion sprang up in Persia (modern-day Iran) that became known to the outside world as Zoroastrianism after its founder, Zarathustra. The new religion taught that the universe consisted of two distinct aspects: on the one hand good and light, and on the other, evil and darkness.

It is believed that Cyrus set out on a campaign of conquest not for territory or wealth but to overthrow corrupt empires and to further the cause of good over evil. His success was remarkable, and his conquest of Babylon was but one step in the establishment of the largest empire the world had ever known.

Just as Cyrus' reason for conquest was unique, the administration of the empire he established was equally unprecedented (see Note 1). While the empires of Assyria and Babylon had destroyed cities and temples and forcibly removed their people and gods, Cyrus set about to return captive peoples to their homelands, rebuild their temples and restore their religions.

The "Cyrus Cylinder," a large clay tablet (see illustration below) discovered by archaeologists in Babylon in 1879, records Cyrus' detailed instructions commanding this remarkable reversal of history. Although this event applied to a number of nations that the Mesopotamian kingdoms had taken captive, its impact in freeing the exiled Jews was, of course, the providential fulfillment of the promises made through the prophets.

The inscribed Cyrus Cylinder detailing Cyrus' decree allowing captive peoples to return home and their temples to be rebuilt. Image: Prioryman.

Even though they had been liberated by Cyrus, not all of the Jews went home. A great many stayed in Babylon where they had now settled, and some moved further east into the heartland of Cyrus' empire and especially to the Persian capital of Susa (biblical "Shushan"), where the story of the young Jewish woman Hadassah (better known by her Persian name, Esther) is set.

But many Jews were happy to return to their homeland, devastated though it may have been. The return occurred in at least three or four major waves. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah seem to indicate that shortly after 538 BC, over forty thousand Jews returned to Israel under the separate or combined leadership of the Judean prince Sheshbazzar (Ezra 1:8; etc.), who may have been Shenazzar the son of Jeconiah, king of Judah (1 Chronicles 3:18), and Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2; etc.), who was also a descendant of King David. But it is possible that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel were the same individual (see Note 2). Later, perhaps in 458 BC, around five thousand exiles returned from Babylon with the priest Ezra (Ezra 7:8), and a few years later, in 445 BC, another group returned with Nehemiah (Nehemiah 2:1–9). The exact dates of these returning groups is unsure, however (see Note 3).

The returning exiles settled in what had been Judah and what the Persians now called *Yehud Medinata,* the "Nation of the Jews." The area was regarded as a self-governing province of the Persian Empire with its

own laws and even issued its own coins. Nevertheless, many of the neighboring cultures – notably the Samaritans who populated what had been the northern kingdom of Israel – refused to accept the returning Jews and did much to hamper their rebuilding and reestablishment (Ezra 4:4). This animosity led to the Jew's enemies appealing to the Persian authorities with the claim that the Jews were illegally rebuilding Jerusalem in preparation for revolt, and the rebuilding was stopped (Ezra 4:6-24).

However, because of the urging of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1-2), work was resumed in the reign of Darius I, at which time the Persian governor Tattenai (see Note 4) corresponded with the monarch to check if the Jews had permission to rebuild (Ezra 5:6-17). After having the royal archives searched, Darius replied that they had indeed been given that permission and any who attempted to stop them should be harshly punished (Ezra 6:1-12). Tattenai then assisted the Jews in the process of reconstruction while commanding their enemies to leave them untroubled (Ezra 6:13). From that point on the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple were assured.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

Like the book of Daniel, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were composed mainly in Hebrew, with sections in the more widely-used Aramaic language. They appear together as a single book in the Hebrew Scriptures, though there is evidence that the works were composed individually and only later combined. We will consider them separately, as they appear in the English Bible. The text of both books is simple narrative, and they are quite straightforward to understand; so in this section we will concentrate on some of the significant events they record.

Ezra, "[Yahweh] helps," was active c. 480–440 BC. The book of Ezra tells us most of what we know about the dedication of the relatively small Second Temple once it was completed on the site of the destroyed First Temple. In keeping with the conditions of the time, its dedication ceremony was much less grandiose than that organized by Solomon, as we can see by comparing 1 Kings 8:63 with Ezra 6:16-18. One hundred bulls were sacrificed (as opposed to 22,000 oxen for Solomon's temple), two hundred rams and four hundred male lambs (as opposed to 120,000 sheep and goats) and a sin offering of twelve goats, probably symbolizing an offering for all twelve tribes. The fact that a great Passover was organized

by the post-exile generation at this time (Ezra 6:19) is also important, as this is the first Passover the Bible records since the time of the good king Josiah over one hundred years earlier. The ceremony that had originally celebrated the freedom of Israel after their bondage in Egypt was now kept with new meaning – as a celebration of freedom from captivity in Babylon.

Ezra's own role in the national reconstruction was primarily religious. He was a priest, a descendant of the last high priest to serve in the First Temple (Ezra 7:1), and a relative of Joshua, the first high priest of the Second Temple (Ezra 3:2). He was also a scribe, knowledgeable in the law of Moses and other extant writings of the Hebrew Bible. As a result, the Persian king, Artaxerxes, sent him from Babylon to Jerusalem to teach the laws of God to the returned exiles (Ezra 7:1-10). In Jerusalem Ezra found that many Jews had been marrying non-Jewish women, and as the representative of the king he was able to enforce the dissolution of these prohibited marriages (Deuteronomy 7:1-6; Ezra 9-10). This was a purely religious issue as converts were accepted from other nations (Ezra 6:21), but these women were doubtless not converts.

Nehemiah, "Yahweh comforts," was active c. 465–424 BC. Nehemiah was a "cupbearer" in the court of the Persian king Artaxerxes I (465-424 B.C.), an important role that was much more than a personal attendant or royal wine taster. Cupbearers often carried the personal seal of the king and might have considerable administrative responsibilities. This is likely true in Nehemiah's case as the king asks him how long he would be gone when Nehemiah requests permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild its walls (Nehemiah 2:6) and also appoints him as governor of the area (Nehemiah 5:14). Historical events of the period indicate that Artaxerxes may have been pleased to approve the request in order to strengthen Jerusalem as a Persian- allied city in an area where Greek forces were then beginning to be active. Also, Artaxerxes was the son of Xerxes, the king who married Esther – another possible reason for the king's favorable reply.

Although the book of Nehemiah deals mainly with the rebuilding of Jerusalem's city walls and fortifications (Nehemiah chapters 2-4, 6), it also records Nehemiah's political and moral renewals – including the restitution of mortgaged properties and land, the restoration of the Sabbath and festivals, and the making of a national covenant of repentance and obedience (Nehemiah 9-10). Like Ezra, Nehemiah also enforced the dissolution of the marriages of Jewish men – and particularly priests – with (non-converted) foreign women (Nehemiah 13:23-30). It helps when

reading Nehemiah to understand that the "officials" he mentions were probably Persian, the "Jews" were the common people, and the "nobles" were the Jewish family heads, often called "elders" earlier in the Old Testament.

Haggai, "Festive," was active around 520 BC. Little is known of Haggai other than that like his contemporary Zechariah, he was among the exiles who returned to Jerusalem. Both actively promoted the rebuilding of the temple after work on it had been delayed eighteen years, but Haggai was particularly concerned that the Jews were spending most of their time and energy addressing their own needs and rebuilding their homes while neglecting the temple construction (Haggai 1:2-11). The prophet made the case that once basic needs were met, the first priority should be the restoration of the temple and that commitment to the worship of God would bring blessings that could not be guaranteed by their own efforts. Importantly, both Haggai and Zechariah expressed clear messianic hopes in regard to the Jewish governor Zerubbabel's leadership of the restored nation (Haggai 2:20-23; etc.).

Zechariah, "Yahweh remembers," was active c. 520 BC. Zechariah was a member of a prominent priestly family (Zechariah 1: 1), and his message not only emphasized the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, but also promoted the role of the high priest, Joshua, alongside the Persian-appointed governor, Zerubbabel. Zechariah's ministry began just two months after Haggai's, and his message complemented that of Haggai in calling for a spiritual revival among the returned exiles and stressing that spiritual rededication must precede social and political restoration. A noticeable aspect of his prophecy, however, is the apocalyptic element in which angelic-guided visions figure prominently, as they did in the book of Daniel and would, in New Testament times, in the book of Revelation.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

A key theological concept that is developed in the books of Isaiah and Daniel, and then implied in Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah is that of the sovereign power of God to shape world history and the history of his people as he sees fit and not according to what we humans may feel is religiously acceptable.

Isaiah referred to the gentile Cyrus not only as the "shepherd" of God (Isaiah 44:28), but also as God's "anointed" or "messiah" (Isaiah 45:1). To understand these statements in context, we must remember that many kings, prophets, and priests were anointed and thus could be called "messiahs" without the significance of being a savior. Nevertheless, the term messiah (Hebrew *mashiak*) is used with great emphasis in the case of Cyrus – as the "title of honor" that God promises to bestow on the king (Isaiah 45:4). He is the only foreigner identified in the Bible as a messiah, and Isaiah refers to him as "his [God's] messiah" a description not used of any other individual called by the term messiah. In that sense Cyrus was used by God as a physical savior of the Jewish people and a type of the ultimate Messiah to come.

Interestingly, Isaiah knew full well that his Jewish audience would hardly accept the concept of a pagan gentile king as a national savior, and it is with this issue in mind that the prophet then stresses God's sovereign right to do as he pleases in the outworking of history. That is the context of Isaiah's famous words just a few verses after calling Cyrus God's messiah:

> "Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker, those who are nothing but potsherds among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?' … Concerning things to come, do you question me about my children, or give me orders about the work of my hands?" (Isaiah 45:9, 11).

Just as it would be foolish for the clay to argue with the potter, Isaiah implies, so it would be foolish for the Jews to question God's working through the pagan Cyrus to redeem them from exile. For a nation used to being led only by members of their own society and religion, the role of Cyrus and his successors carried important lessons regarding our acceptance of God's will as to what is ultimately wise and right.

Another lesson that the returning exiles perhaps did not grasp, but that we might more easily see with our view of history is the way God shapes circumstances to accomplish his purposes. It was mentioned above that a possible reason that Artaxerxes was supportive of Nehemiah's request to build the defensive walls of Jerusalem (a much more politically sensitive request than to rebuild the temple) was that the Persians' major enemy, the Greeks, had just recently begun to carry out military activities in the area and had seized the coastal Palestinian city of Dor to use as a military base. God, who stirs up the minds and activities of individuals and nations, could

easily have encouraged the Greeks in their brief infiltration of the Palestinian area (which did not continue at that time) to make the rebuilding and strengthening of Jerusalem desirable from the Persian perspective. For the Jews returned from exile, the nearby Greek aggression may have seemed highly undesirable, yet it may well have been orchestrated by God in order to help them.

* Note 1: The policies of Cyrus have reverberated through history to recent times. Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States and author of the American Declaration of Independence, was influenced by Cyrus and urged his grandson to read a biography of the ancient king.

* Note 2: The book of Ezra begins with Cyrus returning the objects taken from the temple to Sheshbazzar, a "prince of Judah," who then essentially disappears from the story, and Zerubbabel abruptly becomes the main character. Both Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel are said to be governors of Judah and both are said to have laid the foundation for the temple. So it is possible that the two names represent the same person, or that Sheshbazzar was a different person – perhaps the Shenazzar mentioned in 1 Chronicles 3:18 – or that Sheshbazzar began the work on the temple foundations and Zerubbabel finished it.

* Note 3: If the Artaxerxes mentioned by Ezra was Artaxerxes II, Nehemiah would have arrived in 445 BC and Ezra in 398 BC. This is possible because Nehemiah's mission was to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and Ezra 9:9 states the walls were in place when Ezra arrived. Also, while Nehemiah gives a detailed list of the exiles who returned with Zerubbabel, he seems not to mention the five thousand who accompanied Ezra. Nevertheless, this reconstruction has not replaced the traditional one followed in this chapter.

* Note 4: A number of cuneiform tablets mentioning Tattenai have survived from what seems to have been a family archive. One tablet dated to the twentieth year of Darius I, 502 BC, identifies an individual as a servant of "Tattannu, governor of Across-the-River" – the Persian name for the region controlled by Tattenai – just as described in the Bible (Ezra 5:6).

23. BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

After their return to the land of their fathers, the Jewish exiles experienced a brief religious revival in the form of the rebuilding of the temple and the activity of Ezra and Nehemiah as well as that of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. This was followed by the prophetic work of Malachi (examined below), but that there were deep problems within Jewish society and a lack of general religious dedication among many is clear in the messages of the final books of the Old Testament. Soon afterwards, the leaders raised up by God and the light of prophecy that he had given in this period ended. It would be four long centuries before the light eventually returned – in New Testament times – and Israel now entered a dark age in which it fell under the control of one major power after another. These dark centuries from approximately 400 BC to the birth of Jesus consisted of:

The Persian period – which was already starting to wane

The Alexandrian period – of Alexander the Great and his Hellenistic (Greek culture) successors

The Egyptian period – when the region was controlled by Hellenized Egyptian rulers

The Syrian period – a low point at which the Jews were actively martyred by their Syrian enemies

The Maccabean (or Hasmonean) period – a brief interlude of independence but with ongoing wars

The Roman period – when Israel became part of the Roman Empire.

The dark centuries essentially went from bad to worse as time progressed, but the absorption of Israel into the empire of Rome – brutal though it was – actually brought relative stability and peace at the end of this era and set the stage for the events of the New Testament. However, the long intertestamental decline did not mean that all religious dedication had left Israel. The exile had a lasting effect on the Jewish people, and the period connecting Malachi to Matthew saw an increase in great religious fervor among many. Some of the developments of this period are particularly important in understanding the background to the New Testament.

Many Jews began to peruse the word of God with zeal, studying the Hebrew Scriptures intently, looking for and confirming the reason for the captivity and their subsequent troubles. Following in the tradition of the scribe Ezra, a new order of scribes developed. In their earliest stages they concentrated on simply preserving and teaching the Scriptures, and as time progressed they began to produce the literature known as the Mishna (the laws which had been passed down orally and not recorded in the biblical books) and the Gemara (a commentary on the Mishna). These two collections were later developed and combined to form the Jewish Talmud. In this same period, many of the apocryphal or deuterocanonical books were written from about 150 BC to about AD 70. These books include 1 and 2 Esdras, 2 Esther, the Wisdom of Solomon, and a number of others. Many contain historical and geographical inaccuracies and anachronisms, as well as some obviously fanciful accounts, however, and were rejected by those Jews intent on maintaining the purity of the Scriptures.

During this time, the Aramaic language commonly spoken throughout much of the Near East became the everyday language of the Jewish people, and Hebrew became more and more a religious language somewhat akin to Latin in the modern world. This tended to make for an increasing divide between the professional Bible scholars and scribes who could read and understand the scriptures in their original language and the common people who relied on interpreters. As the intertestamental centuries progressed, the Hellenistic Greek language began to replace Aramaic in many settings, and this was the era in which the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into the Greek Septuagint version (third through the first centuries BC) that would later be quoted by Jesus and Paul and used by many early Christians.

Another major development during this period was the beginning of the synagogue (Greek “assembly”). After the destruction of the temple, these places for assembly were instituted in order to allow formal worship and to provide schools for the education of Jewish children as well as centers for adult study of the Scriptures. The synagogues grew in importance so that by New Testament times, they were at the heart of Jewish life and the people’s worship. The synagogues also became central to the evolution of the Jewish religion itself as it began to change in post-exilic times.

The exile almost completely cured the Jewish people of idolatry, which they recognized as the primary reason for their captivity. After the return they never returned to the idolatry of the nations around them and they began to be increasingly cautious about all aspects of religious life. This led

to the avoidance of use of the personal name of God, Yahweh, out of fear of its misuse, and the substitution of the names "Elohim" (God) and "Adonai" (Lord) for the historic covenant name of Yahweh. It also led to the making of an increasing number of additional religious rules and regulations aimed at avoiding breaking the laws of God. Unfortunately, the process became extreme, and the spirit of the law often became lost in a compulsiveness that led to the rules developed by the Pharisees from about 165 BC on.

Model of Herod's temple by Michael Avi-Yonah. Image: Juan R. Cuadra.

Despite the growth of the synagogues, the temple remained at the center of Jewish identity and was certainly a matter of national pride. Thus, by the close of the era, when Roman rule allowed for stability and construction, King Herod of Judah (72-4 BC – see Note 1), was able to expand the initially small Second Temple into a major edifice far greater in size, and doubtless far larger even than the original temple of Solomon (see image above). Construction began in 20 BC and continued after Herod's death, so that by the time of Jesus it had been undergoing development for almost forty-six years (John 2:20). The importance of the temple and the priestly class that served it led to the development of the powerful Sadducean party which often competed with the Pharisees in matters of Jewish political and religious life and which would also be an important part of the background to early Christianity.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

The book of Malachi seems to stand at the close of the Old Testament period and is significant at various levels, so we provide a summary of some of its key aspects here.

Malachi. "My messenger," is probably a shortened form of *Malakhiyah*, "Messenger of Yahweh," as we see from the name of the book in the Septuagint which calls it "His Messenger." As such, Malachi may not be an actual name, but the title of the author, as it is to be understood in Malachi 1:1.

The date of Malachi is also somewhat uncertain, though clearly it was written after the exile, as it uses the Persian term *peha* "governor" (Malachi 1:8), which would only be understandable during the era of Persian control of Judah. The same verse mentions the rebuilt temple, so the book must also be later than 515 BC. Finally, the themes of the book suggest it came after Haggai and Zechariah, which is why it closes the canon as the last book of the Christian Old Testament.

Judging by what Malachi writes, after they had been restored to their land and their temple worship renewed, the commitment of many of the people to God began to wane. Malachi describes a serious situation in which a sizeable percentage of the population seems to have become disenchanted with their religion, either because of the exile itself or the conditions after it, or perhaps both. The extent of this disenchantment is seen in the fact that Malachi opens with the people of Israel questioning God's love for them (Malachi 1:2 – see Note 2). Malachi then accuses the people – and particularly the priests – of failing to give God the respect he deserves in their giving of inferior and blemished sacrifices (Malachi 2:1) – a sure sign that the lack of love was really on the part of the people themselves, not on God's part.

Next Malachi addresses the matter of divorce and wrongful remarriage. It is often noted that he looks at this issue both as a social problem ("Why [are we] … being unfaithful to one another?" – Malachi 2:10) and a religious problem ("Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the Lord loves by marrying women who worship a foreign god" – Malachi 2:11). Unlike Ezra and Nehemiah, under different circumstances, Malachi preaches the maintaining of relationships rather than their severance.

Malachi next reproves the people's attitude of questioning God's justice by quoting their own sayings, such as "All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them" or "Where is the God of justice?" (Malachi 2:17). He warns that God will bring justice to them as a refining fire if they do not repent of their wrongful attitudes as well as their actions against others (Malachi 3:5) and against God himself (Malachi 3:8-14).

Yet Malachi also assures the faithful among the people of God's good intentions toward them (Malachi 3:16-4:3) and closes his book with a promise that God will send Elijah again before the day of the LORD begins (Malachi 4:5-6).

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

The lessons we can learn from Malachi and the intertestamental period that followed his ministry are both humbling and inspiring. On the one hand, God's words to Israel through Malachi are a somber assessment of the whole Old Testament period: "Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them" (Malachi 3:7). Sadly, this has been one of the most consistent patterns we have seen throughout Old Testament history – from Eden to Babylon and beyond. Yet on the other hand, Malachi records God's unfailing desire to continue to work with those who honor him and to fulfill his plans for his people. There are few more encouraging words in the Old Testament than Malachi's assurance of this:

> Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name. "On the day when I act," says the LORD Almighty, "they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him." (Malachi 3:16-17)

Malachi also reveals interesting glimpses of the movement of God in history. As the Jewish nation began to move more and more toward exclusivity in its social and religious life, we find God placing more and more stress on the inclusion of all peoples in his plan. The prophet Isaiah and some others spoke important words concerning the eventual inclusion of the gentiles, but Malachi exhibits a great development of this thought with words such as "Great is the Lord—even beyond the borders of Israel!"

(Malachi 1:5), “My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets” (Malachi 1:11), and “I am a great king,” says the Lord Almighty, “and my name is to be feared among the nations” (Malachi 1:14).

Malachi’s words also provided a light on the path forward – one that would shine beyond the dark centuries after his time: “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty” (Malachi 3:1). This positive looking forward to a messianic hope made Malachi a treasure of faithful people during the intertestamental age. It is also the reason that the short book of Malachi is quoted or alluded to some twenty times in the New Testament – why it has more quoted verses within the space of four contiguous chapters than any other book of the Old Testament.

Malachi closes his book, as we saw, with the famous promise that God would send Elijah again before the day of the LORD (Malachi 4:5-6) when God would next intervene in human history. It might not be possible to think of a more fitting way for the Old Testament to end – than with the promise of one who would usher in the New (Matthew 11:11-14, Luke 1:17).

* Note 1: Herod the Great was born in Idumea to the south of Judah, and his father was an Edomite whose ancestors had converted to Judaism. Although ethnically an Arab, through shrewd and sometimes brutal methods Herod rose to power and became king of Judah. But by Herod’s time the Romans had taken control of the area of Judea and Syria, and Herod ruled only at the discretion of Rome – a situation underlying many of his actions such as his erection of a golden eagle (the widely hated symbol of Roman might) at the entrance to the Jerusalem temple.

*Note 2: This attitude of questioning God’s love for Israel was clearly developed sometime after the return from the exile. In the psalms composed in the early post-exilic period, we find a very different attitude as is seen in examples such as “LORD, you have been favorable unto your land: you have brought back the captivity of Jacob” (Psalm 85:1 NKJV), and “When the LORD turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing … The LORD has done great things for us; and we are glad” (Psalm 126:1-3 NKJV).

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