

Good Word Schedule
“Isaiah”
January, February, March 2021

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Theme: Crisis of Identity

Leading Question: “Was Israel’s place as God’s chosen people irrevocable?”

The book of Isaiah is a pivotal books in the Old Testament. It contains so many passages that have been applied to Jesus, that is has sometimes been called “the fifth Gospel,” as noted by D. J. Wiseman, General Editor of the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, in the “General Preface” to *Isaiah* in the TOTC series [Alec Motyer, *Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1999), 5].

I should note here that Motyer’s commentary is a worthy companion for our studies in Isaiah this quarter. Motyer is a thoughtful Evangelical who takes the book very seriously.

In terms of the structure of the book, Motyer views chapters 1 to 5 as the author’s preface to the book. The message of the book thus begins with Isaiah’s call experience in chapter 6.

The overall structure of the book is unique, dividing tidily into two parts, Isaiah 1-35, which could be called “Israel under the Assyrians,” and 40-66. “Israel under the Babylonians.” Chapters 36-39 is an historical interlude. That historical interlude offers a rare OT opportunity to compare three versions of a particular segment of biblical history, namely, the reign of Hezekiah: 2 Chronicles 29-32 and 2 Kings 18-20, in addition to Isaiah 36-39.

Isaiah and the Kings of Judah During his Ministry

The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary* (rev. ed., 1979), gives this description of the Isaiah’s prophetic ministry: “He was a son of Amoz (Is. 1:1; not Amos) and came to the prophetic office toward the close of the reign of Uzziah (Azariah), c. 790 - c. 739 B.C. and served also under Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (d. c. 686). Tradition makes him cousin of Uzziah. The chronology of Sennacherib’s campaigns into Judah (ch 36 and 37) shows that Isaiah remained active in the prophetic office approximately to the close of Hezekiah’s reign, and that his ministry therefore spanned more than half a cent.”

Here is a list of the four kings under whom Isaiah served, with the number of years each reigned and a brief evaluation of their reigns according to the assessment in 2 Kings:

Uzziah (Azariah), 52 years: “He did what was right” (2 K 15:3) – but see 2 Chron. 26:16-21, for the record of his tragic incursion into the temple and his resultant leprosy.

Jotham, 16 years: “He did what was right” (2 K 15:34)

Ahaz, 16 years: “He did not do what was right” (2 K 16:2)

Hezekiah, 29 years: “He did what was right” (2 K 18:3)

Question: What kind of stance could one expect from the prophet, given the record of the kings under which he served?

Note: The three sources reporting on the reign of Hezekiah give differing events and assessments of his reign. Chronicles is the most positive, including three whole chapters describing the Passover which Hezekiah initiated. Neither Chronicles nor Isaiah say anything about this Passover. And the ill-advised show-and-tell to the Babylonians is recorded in all three, but Chronicles handles it very gently, almost evasively, while both Isaiah and Kings gives Hezekiah's response a flippant twist:

2 Chron. 32:25-26: The Chronicler's evasive comment: But Hezekiah rendered not again according to the benefit done unto him; for his heart was lifted up: therefore there was wrath upon him, and upon Judah and Jerusalem. Notwithstanding Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart, both he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the wrath of the Lord came not upon them in the days of Hezekiah.

2 Kings 20:19: Hezekiah's flippant response to Isaiah: "The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good." For he thought, "Why not, if there will be peace and security in my days?"

Isaiah 39:8: Hezekiah's flippant response to Isaiah: "The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good." For he thought, "There will be peace and security in my days."

Question: Given the differing responses recorded in different sources in Scripture, how reliable are the prophetic judgments?

Comment: The primary thrust of the biblical responses is remarkably consistent, though the biblical writers do not hesitate to add their own nuance and emphasis. Perhaps one could quote a former dean of the Walla Walla College (University) School of Theology, Gordon Balharrie: "The things that really matter in Scripture are embarrassingly clear."

Question: Could a modern spokesperson for God "get away with" accusing God's people of being like Sodom and Gomorrah, as Isaiah did? After a devastating critique of the wickedness of God's people (Isaiah 1:2-8), Isaiah declared in 1:9-10:

If the Lord of hosts
had not left us a few survivors,
we would have been like Sodom,
and become like Gomorrah.

Hear the word of the Lord,
you rulers of Sodom!
Listen to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!

Isaiah's wide-ranging critique of religious practices among God's people has led some to suggest that he was actually ready to abandon virtually all religious practice. Notice the power of this rhetoric in Isaiah 1:11-15:

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the Lord;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.
When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more;
bringing offerings is futile;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.
Your new moons and your appointed festivals
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me,
I am weary of bearing them.
When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.

Comment/Question: Isaiah's prescription consists of 9 forceful commands. Are they too forceful for today's church?

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.

Question: Can we really "wash" ourselves and make ourselves "clean"? Or is that God's work?

Question: What are we to make of the alternation between condemnation on the one hand, and forgiveness on the other?

Isaiah 1:18-20:

Come now, let us argue it out,
says the Lord:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.
If you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land;
but if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be devoured by the sword;
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Question: Is Isaiah's approach simply a stronger version of 1 Corinthians 4: 21: "What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?"

Isaiah 1:21-28

How the faithful city
has become a whore!
She that was full of justice,
righteousness lodged in her—
but now murderers!
Your silver has become dross,
your wine is mixed with water.
Your princes are rebels
and companions of thieves.
Everyone loves a bribe
and runs after gifts.
They do not defend the orphan,
and the widow's cause does not come before them.
Therefore says the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel:
Ah, I will pour out my wrath on my enemies,
and avenge myself on my foes!
I will turn my hand against you;
I will smelt away your dross as with lye
and remove all your alloy.
And I will restore your judges as at the first,
and your counselors as at the beginning.
Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness,
the faithful city.
Zion shall be redeemed by justice,
and those in her who repent, by righteousness.
But rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together,
and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed.

The official study guide takes us from chapter 1 to chapter 5 where we have a “love song” (5:1), but a “love song” with a bite, a stronger bite than in Hosea or the New Testament.

Additional Comment on the Book Isaiah and its Authorship:

The following comments from John Watts’ commentary on Isaiah include important insights on the nature of the book. The tendency of critical scholars is to divide the book into three parts: First Isaiah – Chapters 1 to 39, the only part that mentions Isaiah by name; Second Isaiah – chapters 40 to 55; and Third Isaiah, chapters 56 to 66.

Watts is a moderate evangelical scholar, a Baptist, who seeks to be faithful to Scripture while also recognizing that the material found in the book of Isaiah, covers several centuries. He avoids the more typical evangelical rigidities in dealing with Isaiah, but affirms the divine oversight of the book in a way which is often difficult for “critical” scholars to do.

These quotes many not appear in the Good Word discussion, but they should enable the listeners/readers to ponder some broader perspectives than would usually be the case in conservative (evangelical) circles.

Selected quotes from John. D. W. Watts, “Isaiah,” in *Mercer Commentary on the Bible* (1995).

Authorship [pp. 565-566]

The author, or authors, of the book are unknown. Jewish tradition understood the reference to the PROPHET in the superscriptions (1:1; 2:1 and 13:1) as indications of authorship. Attention to the person ISIAH certainly suggests that this is a book about the prophet Isaiah, known to us otherwise only through the account in 2 Kgs 19-20 [sic: see also 2 Chron. 32:20]. The existence of an apocryphal book, *The Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah*, is ample evidence that the figure of Isaiah had an enduring place in Jewish traditions. The superscriptions in 2:1 and [565 – 566] 13:1 claim that prophecies of a future temple and the destruction of Babylon also belong to *Isaiah son of Amoz* from 1:1.

Modern critical scholarship has trouble ascribing authorship of the entire book to an eighth century prophet because the work of chaps. 40 – 66 so clearly relates to persons and events of the sixth and fifth centuries. The apparent periodization of the material in the Book of Isaiah led to the division of the book into First, Second, and Third Isaiah.

The difficulty of crediting an eighth-century author with so broad an interpretation of history is removed if the phrase *of Isaiah* (1:1) is understood as more than an author’s signature (these issues are also treated below in the commentary on the superscriptions). The author or authors remain unknown.

Unity [p. 566]

If the claim for eighth-century authorship is eliminated, no strong reason remains to deny unity to the book. Chapters 1– 2 at the beginning and 65 – 66 at the end form an INCLUSIO around the historical development in the book. The use of the name *the Holy One of Israel* for God continues throughout the book. The plot, which portrays God’s decrees of destruction in

chap. 6, is balanced by his reversal of that fate in chap. 40. Taken together, these three points open the possibility of reading the book as a coherent whole.

Date [p. 566]

Since the final chapters of the Book of Isaiah do portray the fulfillment of the Vision in the building of the new Temple in Jerusalem, the likely date for completion of the Vision should fall somewhere near the time of Ezra and Nehemiah in the fifth century B. C. E. But many parts of the Vision show signs of belonging to a long period of tradition and of prior use, perhaps going back to the time of the prophet himself.

The Superscription, 1:1 [pp. 568-569]

The opening phrase of the Book of Isaiah, *the vision of Isaiah*, suggests that the entire book is written as a VISION. The whole work is clearly related to a man named *Isaiah*, who is identified as a *son of Amoz*, but it need not be narrowly considered as a designation of the author. The issue of authorship involves a number of problems, especially the evidence that the book describes things that happen over [568/569] a span of centuries. No one person could have recounted all of them.

Theme: Crisis of Leadership

Leading Question: To what extent is God prepared to twist our arms – as he did Isaiah’s – in order to persuade us to enter his service?

In this lesson we tussle with three issues:

1. The nature of God’s call: coercive or freely chosen?

2. The relationship between civil leadership and sacred leadership: Does prophetic authority depend on a strong civil leader, i.e. king?

3. What does it mean when God’s preaching and teaching only hardens the human heart?

1. Nature of God’s call. In order to properly evaluate God’s call to Isaiah, we need to compare his call with other prophetic calls. Here is a list to consider:

- A) (Exod. 3:1- 4:17) **Moses:** divine coaxing and urging; many excuses in return
- B) (Num. 11:16-30) **The Seventy:** one-time, non-volitional experience
- C) (Num. 22-24) **Balaam:** prophetic dictation (cf. Num. 31:16; Josh. 13:22)
- D) (1 Sam. 19:18-24) **Saul:** non-rational, ecstatic prophetic trance, seemingly imposed for defensive purposes (to protect the innocent)
- E) (Isaiah 6) **Isaiah:** a call “almost” freely chosen
- F) (Jeremiah 1:4-19; 12:1-17; 20:7-18) **Jeremiah:** coerced, overpowered, openly complaining
- G) (Ezekiel 2-3; 24:15-18) **Ezekiel:** coerced, overpowered, but uncomplaining and unemotional
- H) Jonah 1, 3-4) **Jonah:** angry, reluctantly obedient (“failed prediction; successful prophecy”)

Of all these prophetic calls, Isaiah seems to come closest to freely chosen response. But even with him, he was overpowered with a sense of God’s presence. In other words, his exuberant, “Here am I, send me!” was triggered by a powerful sound and light show. Could anyone in their right mind, dare refuse such a call?

And that raises the underlying question: How does a prophetic call compare with the calling which ordinary believer receive?

Note: In Ellen White’s day, some were appealing to her seemingly strong-arm tactics to justify their own use of the heavy hand. Ellen White discouraged such a connection. These are her specific words to those who attempted to justify their own approach by appealing to hers:

“God has not given my brethren the work that He has given me. It has been urged that my manner of giving reproof in public has led others to be sharp and critical and severe. If so, they must settle that matter with the Lord. If others take a responsibility which God has not laid upon them; if they disregard the instructions He has given them again and again through the humble instrument of His choice, to be kind, patient, and forbearing, they alone must answer for the results. With a sorrow-burdened heart, I have performed my unpleasant duty to my dearest friends, not daring to please myself by withholding reproof, even from my husband; and I shall not be less faithful in warning others, whether they will hear or forbear.” (*Testimonies* 5:20 [1882]; repeated in 5:677-78 [1889])

2. Civil Leadership and Sacred Leadership. The official study guide makes a point of highlighting the fact that Isaiah’s vivid experience came in the year that King Uzziah died, suggesting that his death triggered a crisis.

According to the biblical records, Uzziah had been a good king, until he arrogantly entered the temple in an attempt to perform sacred duties to which he was not entitled. As a result, he was struck with leprosy and had to live in isolation.

Now of the four kings who reigned during Isaiah’s ministry, only one of them, Ahaz, is described as *not* doing what was right. Of the other three – Uzziah, Jotham, and Hezekiah – it is said in Scripture that they did what was right. Scripture records no stain at all on Jotham, but both Uzziah and Hezekiah had their flaws.

Question: To what extent did strong spiritual life depend on the civil leader? To what extent is that still the case today?

3. Preaching that makes the ears heavy. These “hard” words from Isaiah are repeated by Jesus in Matthew 13:14-15.

“Go and say to this people:

‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
keep looking, but do not understand.’
Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears,
and shut their eyes,
so that they may not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and comprehend with their minds,
and turn and be healed.”

In Isaiah, the verses that follow list dire consequences for not hearing and obeying!

Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said:

“Until cities lie waste
without inhabitant,
and houses without people,
and the land is utterly desolate;

until the Lord sends everyone far away,
and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.

Question: How does this way of dealing with people function in our day? Is it like it was in Isaiah's day and Jesus' day? In another setting, Jesus quoted other words from Isaiah, ones that were much more encouraging:

Isaiah 42:3 "a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice."

Matthew 12:20 "He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick until he brings justice to victory."

Question: How is the modern follower of Jesus know which method to use with others?

Theme: When Your World Is Falling Apart

Leading Question: How does the Lord work with those who are disobedient?

Our lesson this week focuses on Isaiah 7, an event that takes place entirely during the reign of Ahaz, the only truly “bad” king of the four under who Isaiah ministered. According to the narrative in 2 Kings 16, Ahaz was far from the ideal. “He even made his son pass through fire” (16:3). Furthermore he made significant changes in the temple and worship services because of altar he had seen in Damascus when he went there to meet Tiglath-pileser, the Assyrian king.

Would the Lord work with such a king? The answer is a resounding yes. Two of the small-time kings – from Israel and Aram – had made an alliance to fight against Assyria. When Ahaz refused to join them, they planned to invade Judah and put the “son of Tabeel” on the throne, thus eliminating the house of David! It was a serious threat: “the heart of Ahaz and the heart of the people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind” (Isa. 7:2).

Question: God was clearly willing to work directly with the wicked king Ahaz. Is that still the case today?

The Prophet’s Two Sons

Isaiah’s wife bore him two sons whose names were significant signs for the king Ahaz. The first was named Shear-Jashub – “a remnant shall return” and became significant for the king when Isaiah went to meet Ahaz and took his son with him (Isa. 7:3).

Question: In what way was “a remnant shall return” a two-edged sword for Ahaz?

Comment: The context loads the name with remarkable ambivalence for Ahaz. The official study guide puts it this way:

“Ahaz would be startled when Isaiah greeted him and introduced his son, named “A Remnant Shall Return.” Remnant of whom? Shall return from what? Because the boy’s father was a prophet, the name sounded like an ominous message from God about people going into captivity. Or was it about returning to God in the sense of repenting (the verb “return” also carries the meaning of repentance)? The message from God to Ahaz was: It means what *you* make it mean! Turn from your sins or go into captivity, and from captivity a remnant will return. The decision is yours.”

Question: Given the king’s evil character, how could one expect such an appeal to work?

The second son, Maher-shalal-hash-baz – “the spoil speeds, the prey hastens” – (8:1-4) was held up to Ahaz as a more ominous sign, one that foreshadowed the Assyrian advance.

Question: How can God justify a second sign to wicked King Ahaz? This isn't quite in the same league with Jesus 70 times 7 standard for forgiveness, but is it moving in that direction?"

Immanuel

The promise in 7:14 has triggered endless debates. Let's look at the verse in the KJV and in the NRSV. Then we can address the crucial issues:

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

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” (NRSV)

Does the shift from “virgin” to “young woman” undermine the virgin birth narrative in Matthew 1:23: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.” (NRSV)?

Comment: When the RSV (followed by the NRSV) used the phrase “young woman” in Isaiah, a great outcry went up from devout conservatives who saw the change as an attack on the virgin birth. It is worth noting, however, that however one might deal with Isaiah 7:14, no modern translation has attempted to translate Matthew 1:23 using the word “young woman.” That is because the context of Matthew 1:23 clearly demands “virgin.” In short, in Matthew, the teaching of the virgin birth is clear and unambiguous. It is Isaiah 7:14 that has raised the question.

Crucial Questions/Issues:

1. Does the virgin birth depend on the use of the “right” word in Isaiah 7:14?
2. Since, in Isaiah, the birth was to be a sign to Ahaz, not just for Jesus' day some 700 years later, would it matter whether the child's mother was a virgin or not?
3. Does a word have to have the same meaning in each passage that it appears? Can it have different meanings and different applications?

An excellent discussion of Isaiah 7:14 is found in *Problems in Bible Translations*, pp 151-169, a book published in 1953 by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. *Problems* lists four primary approaches to Isaiah 7:14: “(1) Isaiah 7:14 constituted no true prophecy of events either in Isaiah's time or in the time of Christ. (2) It was fulfilled in some unknown manner during the days of Isaiah, and not otherwise. (3) It pointed forward exclusively to the birth of Jesus. (4) It was a dual prophecy, applicable both to the days of Isaiah and to the birth of the Messiah” (*Problems*, 151).

At the end of the article, the editors expand slightly on their choice of #4 above: “The prophecy of 7:14, thus viewed, is a dual prophecy having an immediate and primary application

to the days of Isaiah, and a secondary and later, but nevertheless a meaningful and vital, application to the birth of the Messiah” (*Methods*, 169).

Question: Can we identify some of the crosscurrents that tend to push people toward the extremes? The first two suggestions are from the “liberal” end of the spectrum; the third one is a typical evangelical/fundamentalist. The last one is a remarkably balanced view which has been articulated by Seventh-day Adventists, and allows the full context of the Old Testament and the New Testament to be confirmed.

Theme: The Hard Way

Leading Question: Is it true for everyone that God first offers us the easy way, but if we refuse, we must learn the hard way?

This week's lesson is haunted by the dark image of Ahaz. God has offered him signs and hope, but he refused and kept on his evil ways toward destruction.

Question: When a leader goes astray, is it inevitable that those whom he leads also go astray? Are there examples in Scripture of both situations?

Comment: On the side of those who resisted the evil of their leaders, we could put the 7000 in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal in the time of Elijah (1 Kings 19). Elijah had stood alone on the top of Carmel. And after his victory of Baal, he led Ahab's chariot down the mountain in the drenching rain.

Typically, however, as the king goes, so goes the people. And in the era of the judges, as long as the judge was alive, the people were faithful. But after the judge died, they fell away.

Question: Is there a tension between the call to live in the fear of the Lord and the NT statement that perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18)? Or was fear a more prominent feature of the OT?

Question: Is there a time and place when God can use teeth-chattering fear to motivate his people? Consider this passage from Deuteronomy 5:22-35:

22 These words the Lord spoke with a loud voice to your whole assembly at the mountain, out of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, and he added no more. He wrote them on two stone tablets, and gave them to me. 23 When you heard the voice out of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you approached me, all the heads of your tribes and your elders; 24 and you said, "Look, the Lord our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the fire. Today we have seen that God may speak to someone and the person may still live. 25 So now why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any longer, we shall die. 26 For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and remained alive? 27 Go near, you yourself, and hear all that the Lord our God will say. Then tell us everything that the Lord our God tells you, and we will listen and do it."

28 The Lord heard your words when you spoke to me, and the Lord said to me: "I have heard the words of this people, which they have spoken to you; they are right in all that they have spoken. 29 If only they had such a mind as this, to

fear me and to keep all my commandments always, so that it might go well with them and with their children forever! 30 Go say to them, 'Return to your tents.' 31 But you, stand here by me, and I will tell you all the commandments, the statutes and the ordinances, that you shall teach them, so that they may do them in the land that I am giving them to possess." 32 You must therefore be careful to do as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn to the right or to the left. 33 You must follow exactly the path that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you are to possess.

Question: What does the Old Testament teach about communication with the dead and how does that enter into our understanding of Isaiah 8:19-20? Note how the KJV and the NRSV differ in their translation:

Isa. 8:19 And when they shall say unto you, Seek unto them that have familiar spirits, and unto wizards that peep, and that mutter: should not a people seek unto their God? for the living to the dead? 20 To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them. (KJV)

Isa. 8:19 Now if people say to you, "Consult the ghosts and the familiar spirits that chirp and mutter; should not a people consult their gods, the dead on behalf of the living, 20 for teaching and for instruction?" surely, those who speak like this will have no dawn! (NRSV)

Comment: The traditional SDA use of Isaiah 8:20 takes the passage thoroughly out of context, using it as a proof text for keeping the commandments. The concept is a true one, but simply not supported by this particular text.

Question: How serious was the Old Testament objection to magic and divination?

Comment: The use of magic to manipulate God was anathema to Old Testament believers. It may have been a major reason why Satan so rarely appears in the Old Testament. It was too tempting for the people to see Satan as a rival supernatural power, one that could be manipulated by magic. Deut. 18:10-12 lists a significant list of prohibited activities, among them, the magical arts:

Deut. 18:10: "No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, 11 or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead. 12 For whoever does these things is abhorrent to the Lord; it is because of such abhorrent practices that the Lord your God is driving them out before you" (NRSV).

Theme: Noble Prince of Peace

Leading Question: Why do Old Testament passages give us such a bloody path as the way to the Prince of Peace?

The section of Isaiah that our lesson this week covers is from Isaiah 9 to 12. These four chapters include some of the most precious passages for Christians. Chapter 9 includes the hymn “For a child is born” (9:6) and chapter 11 includes the vivid presentation of God’s vegetarian kingdom: “They will not shall hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain” (11:9). Yet interspersed with these wonderful promises is a great deal of blood and warfare. Indeed, immediately following that vision of the peaceable kingdom, Isaiah describes the recovery of Israel’s remnant with force and bloodshed.

Question: What kind of explanation can we offer that would preserve the beauty of the ideal while preserving the integrity of Scripture, including those passages that speak of violence?

Questions about the coming “Child” of Isaiah 9:

- 1. The description of the rule of the “Child” sounds very much like a kingdom of this world, the very kind of messiah that the people of Jesus’ day seemed to crave. Yet when Jesus came, he pointed not to the conquering king of Isaiah 9, but to the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. And the people rejected the suffering servant model. Couldn’t they point to Scripture to justify their rejection of the suffering service idea?**
- 2. Exalted language is used in Isaiah 11 to describe the person and mission of the coming deliverer: Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Yet the messianic prophecies in the narrow sense, did not see the “messiah” as a divine figure. He was the “anointed one,” but not understood as God incarnate – until after the resurrection?**

A psalm of comfort. Isaiah 12 brings a psalm of comfort to the people: “for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away and you comforted me” (Isa. 12:1).

Question: From the standpoint of experience, can the believer feel free to claim the promises of God’s comfort, even though they may fall short of the ideal?

Following this lesson, is a chapter from Alden Thompson, *Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament God?*, “The Best Story in the Old Testament: the Messiah.” It addresses several questions raised in this week’s lesson.

The Best Story in the Old Testament: the Messiah

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light ...
For to us a child is born, to us a son is given... (Isaiah 9:2, 6)

My choice of best story in the Old Testament is not a specific episode like the worst story, but rather a great theme which springs from deep roots in the Old Testament and finally bursts into bloom in the New. Certainly one of the most insistent and obvious claims of the New Testament is that Jesus of Nazareth came as the fulfillment of the Old Testament messianic hope, John has recorded how Jesus chided his Jewish hearers: "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me" (John 5:46). And after the resurrection, Jesus expounded to the disciples on the Emmaus road the *real* meaning of the Old Testament: "And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). Not too long afterwards he appeared to the eleven disciples and said: "These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (Luke 24:44-45).

So the claim of the New Testament seems to be clear enough, but having said that, a couple of interesting and potentially distressing observations must not be over-looked. First, the Jewish Community as a whole has not accepted Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfillment of the Old Testament hope. From the Jewish point of view, Christianity is a breakaway movement which has pinned its hopes on a messianic pretender. Never mind the fact that the Christian movement has been reasonably popular and successful; the point is that Judaism has rejected the claim of the New Testament that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament messianic hope.

The second observation that we must not neglect is that Jesus own disciples so radically misunderstood his mission. The synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, in particular, highlight the contrast between Jesus' grasp of his mission and that of his disciples. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in Matthew 16 where Peter openly proclaims to Jesus: "You are the Christ (Messiah), the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). Jesus was pleased with Simon's confession, though he warned the disciples that the time was not yet ripe to share this conviction (Matt. 16:20). Then he opened to them the real nature of his mission: "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Matt. 16:21). Peter's response? "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you." To which Jesus replied: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men" (Matt. 16:23).

Now one might think that conversations like that should have been clear enough, yet apparently the disciples either could not or would not believe. Returning to Luke's description of the Emmaus Road conversation, we learn that the followers of Jesus were stunned and disheartened by Jesus' death: "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). To be sure, after Jesus had appeared several times to the disciples following the resurrection, they

caught a fresh vision of their risen Lord, a vision both in the physical and spiritual sense, and the book of Acts records the powerful impact of that post-resurrection experience. So the disciples finally did believe, no question about that, but the point I want to make is, that during Jesus' ministry they did not believe aright nor did they understand. Regardless of what later Christians may accept or believe, all the evidence suggests that even Jesus' closest associates apparently did not grasp the true meaning of the messianic prophecies or the real meaning of the sacrificial system. In the light of this New Testament evidence, it is likely that even John the Baptist did not really understand what he was saying when he said of Jesus: "Behold, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29, 36). Later, John himself, languishing in prison and deeply torn by doubt, gives utterance to his uncertainty in a pathetic appeal to Jesus: "Are you he who is to come or shall we look for another?" (Matt. 11:3).

This agonizing question put by John is one which every Christian should seek to answer for himself, and not simply in a superficial way. Should Jesus' messianic claims, rejected by the Jews and so thoroughly misunderstood during the years of Jesus' earthly ministry, be so glibly and lightheartedly accepted by those of us who come many years later in the Christian tradition? Should we not also participate in the searching agony of our forefathers as we attempt to make that Christian message our very own?

Speaking now from my own experience, I can say that a little agonizing over Jesus' messianic claims can result in a real blessing, to say nothing of solving a number of problems of interpretation along the way. But I must share with you the route of my pilgrimage so that you can better understand why this best story turns out the way it does.

"MESSIANIC" PROPHECIES

As a young Christian in a conservative Christian environment I was exposed to a fair amount of traditional Christian material. I suspect that anyone who has been an active participant in a conservative Christian community is well aware of the manner in which messianic prophecies have been handled. I will not cite any specific sources, but will simply summarize the general impression that had become part of my own outlook. First, I learned of the hundreds of amazing prophecies which pointed forward to the true Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. The chances of anyone other than Jesus of Nazareth fulfilling these prophecies was said to be one in millions. Second, the Jewish people had every opportunity to accept Jesus. Not only were the prophecies explicit, leaving them without excuse, but also the sacrificial system pointed them directly to their promised Savior. Still, they rejected him.

The residual effect of that two-fold emphasis led imperceptibly to the conclusion that the first century Jews were simply stubborn and the disciples were at least blind, if not stupid. But the other side of the coin is even more dangerous from a spiritual point of view, for my suspicions about the Jews and disciples implied that "we Christians" were not stubborn like they were, and since we clearly understood the prophecies, we were certainly much brighter than the disciples. Now please pardon this rather too-vivid picture. I have probably over-stated the case, but I do think that something like the above scenario does lurk rather ominously in the background of those of us who have grown up with traditional Christianity.

When I first began to look seriously at these Christian claims, I had considerable difficulty in suppressing my uneasiness, for as I began looking at some of the New Testament

“prophecies” I found them less than convincing. The thought crossed my mind more than once: “If this is what the Christian claim is based on, Christianity is in deep trouble.” Some of the “proofs” cited in support of Jesus’ claims seemed to be so very convincing to the New Testament writers, yet, quite frankly, they made very little sense to me. How could that be? Was Christianity built on a foundation of wood, hay, and stubble, after all? As I recall, I was enjoying a good Christian experience at the time, so there was no immediate danger of my world falling apart, yet I found it very uncomfortable to think that this good experience might possibly be built on sinking sand instead of on solid rock. I thought of the hundreds of years of Christian tradition and of the many noble and helpful Christians that I had known personally. But I also thought of those who had rejected the Christian tradition in favor of a skeptical or even atheistic position. All these thoughts went tumbling through my head.

But before we look at the solution which I have since found so helpful, let me give you a more specific glimpse of the kinds of difficulties that began to gnaw at my certainties. For sake of convenience, we may note several “prophecies” from the Gospel of John, all of which are cited from Psalm 69.

1. “Zeal for thy house will consume me” (John 2:17). This statement is one that the disciples “remembered” after they had watched Jesus’ cleansing the temple. The original reference is found in Ps. 69:9.

2. “They hated me without a cause” (John 15:25). Jesus applied this statement from Ps. 69:4 to himself as he described the hatred which the world has against him and his Father. The quotation from the psalm is prefaced with the following words: “It is to fulfill the word that is written in their law.” The relationship of this word “fulfill” to our word “prophecy” is one that we will discuss later in the chapter; it can be the source of considerable difficulty.

3. Jesus is given vinegar “to fulfill the scripture” (John 19:28). This comment by the gospel writer that the vinegar offered to Jesus was to “fulfill” scripture, seems to be a direct reference to Psalm 69:21. In contrast to the previous two examples, the Old Testament passage is not actually quoted, yet the inference is clear enough.

Now if you want to experience the same kind of difficulty that I did, go directly to Psalm 69, read it through in its entirety, noting how each of these quotations or allusions is used in the original psalm. Incidentally, you may have noted that the three quotations I have cited are of three slightly different types: the first is attributed to the disciples, the second directly to Jesus, while the third is a comment supplied by the gospel writer himself. Similar examples could be noted almost at random from throughout the New Testament, though it is in the Gospels and Acts where one finds the most interest in the “fulfillment” of prophecy.

Looking specifically at Psalm 69, we must ask what the likely conclusion of the Old Testament readers would have been if they were hearing or reading this psalm in the Old Testament context. Would they have seen this psalm and these phrases as “prophecies,” that is “predictions” of Jesus’ mission? Frankly, I do not see how they could possibly have done so. The psalm is simply a lament by an individual, who is not named in the psalm, although the title

does identify it as a “Psalm of David.” That phrase could easily imply Davidic authorship (the traditional interpretation), but the original, Hebrew could just as easily mean a psalm “to” David, “for” David, “about” David, or “in honor of” David. Many scholars who would not hold to Davidic authorship in the strict sense do think that the speaker was at least one of Israel’s kings in the Davidic line.

For the purposes of our discussion, let us assume that this is a psalm written by David himself. Would the Old Testament reader have seen the true Messiah in this psalm? The New Testament writers obviously did, and we shall return to that in a moment. But for Old Testament readers, the matter would not have been at all clear. In the first instance, the psalm is written by someone who considered himself to be a sinner: “O God, thou knowest my folly; the wrongs I have done are not hidden from thee” (Ps. 69:5). The New Testament claim for Jesus is that he was without sin (cf. Heb. 4:15), so on that point alone we have a definite cleavage between the Old Testament passage and the New Testament fulfillment; at least that is what it appears to be at first glance.

What is even more striking as we compare the content of this psalm with Jesus’ experience, is the remarkable contrast in attitudes towards one’s enemies. Certainly the Christian would accept the attitude of Jesus on the cross as the Christian ideal: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). But if you want to singe your polite Christian ears, read Psalm 69:22-28. Such venomous words are hard to imagine on the lips of our Lord. We shall approach the problem of violent language more directly in our next chapter. But for our purposes here, it is sufficient to note that there is a great gulf between the experience described in the psalm and that of our Lord. When the psalmist was given vinegar to drink (Ps. 69:21), he erupted into violent curses; when Jesus was given vinegar to drink, he prayed for his tormentors.

So there is the problem: the Old Testament psalm was written by a sinner who was still struggling with vengeful feelings towards his enemies. Furthermore, the psalm itself gives no clue that it was pointing forward to a future Messiah. Is this the kind of foundation on which Jesus’ messianic claim was based? It was at this point that I began a serious search to see if perhaps there might be other prophecies which were more worthy of the name. Of course, there is also the matter of the integrity of Jesus and the New Testament writers. When Jesus himself makes statements that I have difficulty in accepting, that is indeed a question I must face if I take my Christian experience seriously.

Rather than let the solution to the above problems emerge gradually in the course of the chapter, I think it would be helpful to outline briefly my suggested solution. Then we can look at the various parts in greater detail. In short, I believe God’s people have appealed to different reasons at different times to establish the same belief in the Messiah. Thus the “prophecies” of the Messiah can be divided into four basic categories:

1. Those prophecies that were evident to the reader of the Old Testament as pointing toward to one who was to come. These could be recognized as messianic prophecies by any honest reader.
2. Those prophecies which Jesus applied to himself and his mission as a result of his own self-understanding and from his own study of Scripture. According to the evidence we have, application of these prophecies to the Messiah in the way that Jesus

understood them was something fresh and original or, at least, his emphasis was different from that of known Jewish teachings about the Messiah.

3. “Prophecies” which were discovered and applied as the events themselves took place or shortly thereafter, a type of “prophecy” which was exceptionally popular in the New Testament era and is frequently found in the New Testament itself.

4. “Prophecies” that were applied to Jesus’ mission in later Christian centuries.

Before we look at each of these categories, it would be well to remind ourselves that, in the course of human experience, finding new reasons for old beliefs and practices is nothing unusual. To cite a rather mundane example, note all the various reasons one could give in support of vegetarianism: ascetic (meat tastes good, therefore should be avoided); health (a vegetable diet leads to better health); humanitarian (be kind to animals); ecological (it is wasteful to feed grain to animals and then eat the animals); religious (animals are sacred so should not be killed, much less eaten). It is unlikely that anyone would hold all those arguments at the same time, or with equal intensity. Furthermore, quite different emphases will be found at different eras in history and in different parts of the world. Applying this observation to the interpretation of Scripture, a similar process can be seen at work as God’s people find new reasons for supporting old beliefs. I think there is no place where that is more evident than in the promises and prophecies of the Messiah. This point will become clearer as we look at examples for each of the four categories.

1. Messianic Prophecies understandable to Old Testament believers

This category is the most basic one, for without a substantial foundation at this level, no one would have expected a Messiah at all. With our twentieth century orientation, we are inclined to think that if a prophecy is really a prophecy, it should be seen as such in advance of the event or person it foretells. That is so obvious to us that even to make the point seems unnecessary. Yet that is precisely the cause of the difficulty, for the New Testament uses the language of prophecy, foretelling, and foreseeing with reference to persons and events that can really be recognized only by hindsight. We shall return to that point below, but here we must look at some of those prophecies which, in Old Testament times, had the potential to kindle the messianic fires in the hearts of God’s people.

Just a comment first, however, on the more technical usage of the terms “Messiah” and “messianic.” In our discussion in the last chapter, we noted that the Hebrew word *mashiah* simply means “anointed one.” In the course of time, however, Israel applied it more specifically to the king as *the* anointed one. Finally, the people began to look to the future and the *ideal* anointed one. So, technically speaking, “messianic” refers to those prophecies which pointed to a coming royal figure, a descendant in the Davidic line. In traditional Christian interpretation, however, the word has taken on a much broader meaning so that almost anything in the Old Testament can fall under the heading “messianic” if it points forward in any way to the coming Redeemer. In this connection, it is interesting to note that the Norwegian scholar, Sigmund Mowinckel chose a neutral title for his basic scholarly study of the “messianic” prophecies of the Old Testament: *He That Cometh*. Thus he could legitimately discuss not just the “messianic”

prophecies, but the full spectrum of Old Testament types which point forward to Christ: king, prophet, servant, and son of man. His title is simply the echo of John the Baptist's searching question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to look for another?" (Matt. 11:3). The more technical meaning for "Messiah" and "messianic" will explain why I have sometimes used quotation marks to set off these terms: I am simply attempting to get the best of both worlds, the traditional and the technical.

Turning now to specific prophecies, we look first to the initial section of the Hebrew canon: the law of Moses, the Pentateuch. Here, Genesis 49:10 and Numbers 24:17 stand out as the most important verses pointing forward to one who is to come. Both are rather cryptic and their broader implications are not at all clear to us, but Jewish interpreters clearly accepted these as "messianic" even though they did not accept Jesus as the Messiah.

Genesis 49:10. The classic King James Version of Jacob's blessing on his son Judah is quite familiar to Christian ears: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be." From Judah, someone was to come who would be the focal point of the people's hope. The passage says very little more than that, but it is enough.

Numbers 24:17. In Balaam's prophecy about Israel the KJV phraseology is again familiar: "I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob I and a Scepter shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth." Here was someone who would one day smash Israel's enemies. Although the term "Messiah" does not appear, this passage was "messianic" for the Jews, and is part of the reason why the Jews and Jesus' own disciples were looking for a heavy-handed Messiah who would smash the enemies of the nation.

In connection with the evidence from the Pentateuch, we should touch on the question of the sacrificial system. Was not this a clear picture of the person and work of the Messiah? A picture, yes, but apparently not a clear one. Where in the Old Testament can you find an *explicit* interpretation of the sacrificial system as applying to the person of the Messiah? Nowhere. Our interpretations of the sacrificial system are from the New Testament. The book of Hebrews is, of course, a powerful exposition of the meaning of the sacrificial system in terms of the mission of Jesus the Messiah. But significantly, the book of Hebrews was written after the death of Jesus, not before. Likewise, the imagery of Jesus as our high priest is primarily the result of inspired reflection on the completed work of Jesus in the light of the sacrificial system. The idea of a royal priest is suggested by Psalm 110:4, but the development of that idea takes place after the cross.

As I have reflected on the way that conservative Christians have dealt with the sacrificial system, I have concluded that we have perhaps confused the type and the antitype, the shadow and the reality (cf. Heb. 10:1). I mean that we have treated the Old Testament sacrificial system almost as though it were clearer than the real event in Jesus Christ. No wonder that we are quite mystified by the Jewish rejection and the dullness of the disciples. If we assume that the sacrificial system was crystal clear, then it loses its value as shadow and becomes the real thing. That is most unfortunate, for the blood of goats and bulls can never be as meaningful as the death of our Lord on the cross.

As for my own view, I do believe the Old Testament believer could gain many of the essential principles of God's plan of salvation from a study of the sacrificial system. Some of the

great men of God may even have caught glimpses in the sacrifices of the death of the one who was to come. Yet interestingly enough, not even one of the Old Testament writers has seen fit to pass along those insights to us; our book of Hebrews is in the New Testament, not in the Old.

I think you will already begin to see the significance of this conclusion for the interpretation of the experience of the disciples and the Jews: they had not yet linked the “royal” prophecies with the “suffering” ones. That was something that God in the flesh must do in their presence. Even then it was very difficult to give up old cherished ideas. But is that not precisely the great danger that faces us every day? We all too easily fall into merely traditional ways of thinking and fail to agonize for the fresh and invigorating vision of truth which comes from a total commitment to our God.

The Pentateuch contains one more “messianic” prophecy that we should note, namely, the promise in *Deuteronomy 18:15-19* of a great prophet like Moses who would come some day in the future. The promise was given by Moses to the people as he prepared them for his own departure. The passage does not say when or how such a prophet would come. The Lord had simply promised the people that the prophet would be like Moses and would come from among their brethren (Deut. 18:18).

It is instructive to note how the New Testament deals with this promise of the prophet. According to the record in the Gospel of John, the people did not necessarily identify “the prophet” with the “Christ” (Messiah), for they asked John the Baptist first if he were “the Christ,” then if he were “Elijah” and then if he were “the prophet” (John 1:21, 25). In other words, they had three distinct figures in mind. Yet John's Gospel also suggests that when Jesus had fed the five thousand, the people were ready to accept him as “the prophet” while also being ready to proclaim him king (John 6:13-14). After the death of Christ, there is also at least a hint in Stephen's speech that this prophecy of a prophet was applied to Jesus, though the identification is not explicit (Acts 7:37). But in any event, the promise of a prophet was clearly part of the fuel that kindled the people's hopes for the future.

Turning to the prophetic books, we now find messianic prophecies in the precise sense of the word. The prophets were writing in the days of the kings, at a time when the people as well as the prophets had begun to realize that none of their kings had lived up to God's great ideal. Through the prophets, God began to direct the hopes of the people to that ideal future king from the house of David. Here, then, are the true promises of the Messiah, the anointed one who would redeem his people. Let us note a sample of some of the more notable passages.

Isaiah 9:2-7. This prophecy speaks clearly of the throne of David (vs. 7), thus indicating its proper messianic character. But from the standpoint of the New Testament and its claims for Jesus, the most fascinating part of this prophecy is the list of titles given in verse 6: “For to us a child is born ... Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” The Jewish leaders of Jesus' day had great difficulty in accepting Jesus' claims to divinity. They were thinking of a great leader in the Davidic succession, but tended to regard him as a *human* figure who would introduce the Kingdom of Yahweh. When Jesus claimed to be *both* this human *Messiah* and *God*, they were startled. Yet here in Isaiah is a key reference suggesting that the child who was to come would indeed be the mighty God.

Isaiah 11:1-9. This prophecy describes how the “shoot from the stump of Jesse” would introduce the great and peaceful kingdom of the future. The Spirit of God would be upon him (vs. 2) and he would judge the poor in righteousness (vs. 4). The climax? The earth would be full

of the knowledge of Yahweh as the waters cover the sea (vs. 9). With a prophecy like that, who wouldn't long for the coming of the Messiah?

Jeremiah 23:5-6. Jeremiah lived through the tragic demise of the southern kingdom of Judah and saw the last kings of Judah killed or deported to Babylon. He had every reason to be disheartened. Nevertheless, this man of God pointed to a great future king from the line of David; Yahweh will raise up for David a righteous Branch (vs. 5) and this is the name by which he will be called, "Yahweh is our righteousness." The idea of a human king taking the name of Yahweh to himself must have been a troublesome thought for traditional Jews. Yet this passage is part of the evidence which lay behind Jesus' claim that he and his Father were one (John 10:30). Or to paraphrase another famous saying: "If you have seen me, you have seen Yahweh" (John 14:9).

The emphasis on the royal figure who was to come, the proper messianic figure, may at least partially explain why the royal psalms (i.e. psalms which speak of the king) were such fertile ground for other "messianic" prophecies. The psalms repeatedly speak of the king as the anointed one, and often bring the anointed one into very close relationship with Yahweh himself (cf. Ps. 2:7). Psalm 110, a very popular New Testament "messianic" psalm, though apparently, not one that was so viewed by the Jews, also makes that famous declaration: "You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek" (Ps. 110:4). The Old Testament itself does not develop this idea of a priest-king, but the suggestion is there and was destined to be developed in great detail in the light of the cross of Christ.

From the third section of the Hebrew Bible, the Writings, one other passage should be mentioned in connection with the Old Testament "messianic" evidence, namely, *Daniel 7:13*. Here, the other-worldly figure of the "son of man" appears. "Son of man" was a title that the New Testament writers often used for Jesus. In fact, it was one of Jesus' favorite titles for himself. The precise meaning of "son of man" in the New Testament has been much discussed and we shall not even touch on that discussion here, but we should note that the "son of man" in Daniel 7:13 is a celestial being who comes from heaven. Hence the imagery of Daniel 7 helps to prepare the way for the claims of Jesus that he was indeed of heavenly origin.

Now after this brief survey of Old Testament evidence, it should be clear enough that the messianic hope at the time of Christ rested on a solid basis. Indeed, the evidence from the New Testament itself testifies that everyone was looking for the Messiah. So in the first century AD, the question most certainly was not *whether* a Messiah was coming or not. That was a foregone conclusion; the Messiah *was* coming. Rather, it was quite a different question that Jesus brought to the attention of his listeners: "What *kind* of Messiah are you expecting?" The Gospel of John describes how the people were ready to take Jesus and make him king after he had fed the five thousand (John 6:14-15). But when Jesus revealed the spiritual nature of his kingdom, they turned away in droves (John 6:6).

A superficial reading of the "messianic" prophecies could indeed suggest the popular conception that the Messiah was to be a conquering king who would smash Israel's enemies. But such a conclusion could come only from a superficial reading of Scripture. When we make a total commitment to righteousness, to truth, to God, the Scriptures come alive with a mysterious glory which quite eludes the casual reader. And that is precisely what happened in Jesus' experience. As he grew in his knowledge of God, the radical nature of his mission was dawning ever more clearly upon him. At the age of twelve the depth of his understanding was already a cause of amazement to the learned rabbis (Luke 2:47). But the time was not yet right; Jesus returned to his

home and was subject to his parents (Luke 2:51).

In that home in Nazareth many things must have happened which helped prepare Jesus for his mission. The biblical record is mysteriously silent about these years in Nazareth, but knowing what we do about men of spiritual power, we can be sure that Jesus was deeply immersed in a growing relationship with his heavenly father. The quality of his prayer life and the depth of his study must have been incredible, for when he finally stepped to the threshold of the world to announce his mission to the universe, the crowds “were astonished at his teaching for he taught them as one who had authority” (Matt. 7:29). What gave his words that ring of authority? His relationship to his Father, to be sure, but our question must now be not just *how* he taught, but *what* he taught, and that is the matter to which we now turn, for Jesus brought fresh insight and a new emphasis to the messianic prophecies which the disciples simply could not accept, even though they did believe that Jesus was the Messiah. It is this unbelievable aspect of Jesus’ ministry that we find developed in the second category of “messianic” prophecies, namely, those that Jesus himself brought to the attention of the people.

2. Messianic prophecies which became clear as a result of the teaching of Jesus

The outstanding example in this category of “messianic” prophecies is none other than Isaiah 53, the prophecy of the suffering servant. For those of us who have been steeped in the New Testament understanding of Jesus’ life and message, one of the most obvious and significant aspects of his experience is his suffering and death. Yet before his death this was just the point that virtually everyone around Jesus refused to accept, including those who accepted him as the promised redeemer.

In my own study of the “messianic” prophecies, it came as a real shock to realize that it was Jesus himself who brought the ministry of the suffering servant into focus as one of the “messianic” prophecies. Yet after the shock had worn away, I began to realize that this was the only logical conclusion that I could draw from the New Testament evidence. The Jews were inclined to reject Jesus completely; the disciples and the crowds (at least for a while) wanted to make him king; but no one wanted to accept him as the suffering servant.

Jesus must have realized the immense challenge that faced him in the form of the popular concept of the Messiah. To help the people realize that the Messiah must first suffer before he could rule was no easy task. In this connection it is fascinating to note how Jesus dealt with some of the biblical data touching on his mission. In particular, his treatment of Isaiah 61 during the synagogue service of Nazareth is remarkable. As he read the familiar words of the prophet, the anticipation of the people must have been building towards the expected climax: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19). But then came a real surprise, for the assembled congregation must have been waiting for the next line: “The day of vengeance of our God” (Is. 61:2). That was what they all longed to see and hear. Instead, Jesus sat down, saying: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). The congregation’s reaction was at first favorable to his “gracious words” (cf. vs. 21), but then the true implications began to emerge and this congregation turned into a ferocious mob, intent on murder (vs. 29). Going against established tradition is hard work, and dangerous. But Jesus

knew all about that and he carried on.

Before we move beyond Jesus' mission and his own self-understanding, a further word about Isaiah 53 might be helpful. In the first instance, the passage itself nowhere links the servant with the royal "Messiah." The servant is obviously close to Yahweh, but he is not identified as a royal figure. For this reason, scholars have debated endlessly as to the original intent of the prophecy. Again, we cannot go into detail here; for our purposes, it is simply important to know that Jesus himself was apparently the first to link publicly this famous passage with the role of the Messiah. But in this connection something remarkable emerges from Jewish sources, for there is clear evidence that the Jewish community did, in fact, interpret Isaiah 53 messianically, but their messianic interpretation bears almost no relationship to the biblical passage. In fact, they have taken this marvelous passage telling of the servant's lamb-like willingness to suffer on behalf of his people, and have turned it completely on its head, rephrasing it so that it becomes a hymn praising a warrior Messiah who makes the other nations suffer. That was just the messianic view in Jesus' day. When the community of God's people could take the very passage which should have opened their eyes to a spiritual kingdom, transforming it to serve their own preconceived ideas, we can appreciate the tremendous challenge facing Jesus as he sought to break through to their hearts and share the good news of a Messiah who gently cares for the suffering sinner. The people wanted no part in such a Messiah, so they destroyed him as a threat to their established tradition. But in so doing, they unwittingly brought to fulfillment those very prophecies which Jesus had brought to light and which have become so central to the Christian understanding of the Messiah.

The fuller meaning of Jesus' self-sacrifice began to emerge among Jesus' followers after the resurrection. As the Christian community reflected on Jesus' earthly experience, they began to see the Old Testament in a radically new light. They began to interpret the Old Testament with renewed enthusiasm. That is why our study of the post-resurrection development of the messianic theme is so crucial. For us the word "prophecy" always implies foresight, but the kinds of messianic prophecies I have included in the third category seem to involve a generous portion of hindsight. It is to these "prophecies" that we now turn.

3. Prophecies discovered and applied in light of the events themselves

This category of messianic prophecies is undoubtedly the most prominent and most popular with the New Testament writers, but it is probably the most difficult one for the modern reader to comprehend. In my own study of messianic prophecies I struggled to make sense out of this type of "prophecy" and to maintain the integrity of the New Testament writers. In the course of my education, even in connection with the Bible, perhaps especially in connection with the Bible, it had been deeply drilled into my head that I must read according to the author's intent. I learned that I must never cite an author as proving the point that I am attempting to make if he himself obviously has something quite different in mind. My problem threatened to become acute when I tried to apply this rule to the New Testament writers and discovered that when they cited the Old Testament authors, they often departed far from the obvious meaning of the Old Testament passage. So I was faced with two alternatives, equally unattractive. First, I could force myself to believe that the Old Testament authors actually said what the New Testament writers claimed for them. In other words, the New Testament writers were always right and their

interpretation would take precedence over what I thought the Old Testament writers originally meant. The other alternative seemed to be to admit that the New Testament writers were wrong in citing the Old Testament in the way they did. In such a case I seemed to be admitting that the New Testament writers were unreliable, and therefore the point that they were arguing, namely, that Jesus was the promised Messiah, was open to question.

As I have suggested earlier, it was at this point that I began to look for more substantial prophecies. The more important of these I have already noted in category one. That, at least, helped to buy a little time as I continued to struggle with the New Testament authors. I was so long in solving the problem for myself and yet the solution now seems so very simple, that I am sometimes perplexed as to how I can best share the good news. But the news is so good that I must at least attempt to share it.

The solution to this third category lies in two parts. First, in an understanding of how God has worked through his inspired writers, and second, in an understanding of some of the popular forms of argument employed by Jewish writers in and around the first century AD. Both of these aspects merit further discussion.

In the first instance, I discovered that I had fallen victim way of thinking about God and his word that had contributed to my difficulty. My thinking went something like this: God is perfect, the Bible is God's word, therefore the Bible is perfect. Now I would hasten to add that the Bible is perfect for the purpose for which God intended it, but that is a far cry from being perfect in the same sense that God is perfect. God's word must be compared with the incarnation: the perfection of divinity clothed with the imperfection and weakness of human flesh. I had tended to think that the logic and rhetoric of the human writers was in fact God's logic and rhetoric. It is not. Scripture reflects the logic and rhetoric of human beings who are speaking God's message under the guidance of his Spirit, but they are also very much under the influence of their own limitations of language, character, knowledge and ability. The Spirit controls the process to the extent that from the writings of these inspired men the sincere seeker for truth can indeed learn what he needs to know about God, but the bits and pieces, especially when taken in isolation and apart from God's intention to communicate the truth, can be very misleading. If an inspired writer is a highly educated individual and has a good grasp of language, he will write accordingly. If, by contrast, a writer comes from an unsophisticated background, he will reveal this background by his homely language, his earthy illustrations and his rough logic. The Spirit does not obliterate these human elements.

How does this apply to our understanding of "messianic" prophecies? In just this way, that the New Testament writers were men of the first century, and since God chose to reveal his will in the first century, he inspired men to give his message in the accepted thought forms of the first century. Here is where the second part of the solution comes in, for when I began to realize the kind of thinking and the kind of logic that was prominent in Jewish sources of the early Christian era, I began to recognize something terribly familiar, namely, precisely those problem arguments that I had found in the New Testament. In short, the New Testament writers were using standard and accepted Jewish methods of treating Scripture when they seemingly departed into such flights of fancy. Remarkably, there is no evidence in the New Testament that the Jewish opponents of the Christian community argued against their methodology; they were quite accustomed to that. They argued, rather, with the Christian conclusion. They were not prepared to accept the suffering servant as their Messiah, even if the Christians used all the right methods

in proving their point. But we need to illustrate this conclusion from the New Testament and from Jewish sources, something that I think we can do fairly quickly and briefly.

The one feature of Jewish methodology that is particularly pertinent for us is the tendency to read later events back into earlier narratives. Without the knowledge of these later events, no one would have dreamed of them on the basis of the earlier narratives. But once the events became known, Jewish rabbis loved to “discover” them in the earlier passages. In the rabbinic discussions, then, it became customary for the rabbis to debate among themselves just which events were “foretold” in which narratives. To illustrate this way of treating Scripture, we could turn almost at random to any of the ancient Jewish commentaries on Scripture, a type of commentary known as Midrash. Many of these commentaries are available in English translation and provide a fascinating insight into Jewish methods of interpreting Scripture.

For our purposes, a glimpse at the Midrash on Genesis 15:17-18 should serve quite well. [See Midrash Rabbah on Genesis, XLIV, 21-22 (English translation published by the Soncino Press, London)]. In interpreting the phrase, “Behold a smoking furnace and a flaming torch,” Simeon Ben Abba said in the name of a yet more famous rabbi, Rabbi Johanan, that in this vision God had revealed four things to Abraham: Gehenna (hell), the kingdoms that would oppress Israel (Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Media, Rome), Revelation, and the Temple. The Midrash then records the rabbinical discussions about the fuller implication of the suggested interpretation. Now if we look at the original Genesis context, none of these four things is at all explicit. The verses immediately preceding (Gen. 15:13-16) do speak of subjugation to a nation which turned out to be Egypt. But in the light of later Jewish history and theology, the rabbis went far beyond the biblical narrative, expanding on the “smoking furnace” to include the negative elements of hell and oppression, while interpreting a “flaming torch” as referring to the positive aspects of Revelation and the Temple. All of this was by way of hindsight, yet the rabbis commented on the passage in such a way as to suggest that Abraham could see this complete picture.

From this same section of the Midrash, a fascinating variation on this Jewish methodology can be illustrated, namely, the use of an individual word occurring in one passage to expand the content of another verse where the same word appears. For example, Rabbi Joshua claimed that this experience of Abraham indicates that God had revealed the dividing of the Red Sea to Abraham. How did he arrive at that remarkable interpretation? The key lies in the Hebrew word for “pieces” (*gezarim*) which appears in the phrase: ‘and a flaming torch passed between these *pieces*’ (Gen. 15:17). This is the same Hebrew word which appears in Ps. 136:13. The KJV translates it as “parts” (*gezarim*) in the phrase: (O give thanks) . . . “to him which divided the Red Sea into *parts*.” Rabbi Joshua assumed that the content of the verse in Psalm 136 (dividing of the Red Sea) must have been included in the earlier experience of Abraham since the biblical narrative uses the same word (*gezarim*) in both passages. He concluded, therefore, that God had revealed the dividing of the Red Sea to Abraham. Remarkable!

These examples are quite typical of rabbinical interpretation of Scripture. And since the New Testament writers were thoroughly immersed in this first-century Jewish culture, they could use these methods without hesitation. Whenever I read through early Jewish sources, I think I detect a certain excitement as the rabbis make fresh “discoveries” in what, to us, almost seems like a sacred game with words. But they were quite serious. So were the New Testament writers.

Given this Jewish background, I can now appreciate the way in which some early Christians excitedly mined the Old Testament for fresh “prophecies” of this Messiah whom they

had already accepted on quite other grounds. These “prophecies” were not the foundation of Jesus’ messianic mission; they were simply later confirmations of something his followers already believed. To be sure, the apostles used these methods in their evangelism, for they were working largely with Jews. Now if we can understand this early Judeo-Christian environment, we no longer need to fault the integrity of the New Testament writers, nor will we fault God for using men who employed such strange methods. God has always used men within their own environment to speak to their contemporaries. It is our responsibility to understand them so that we can understand God’s message to them and through them, a message which he has intended for us also.

When we recognize that the “messianic” prophecies of categories 1 and 2 formed the basis for the disciples’ convictions, then perhaps we can more readily grant them the privilege of using the category 3 prophecies, prophecies which carried a fair bit of weight in their own day, but which seem so strange from the standpoint of our way of reasoning. But let us look now at how the New Testament actually uses this Jewish methodology to establish the messianic claims of Jesus.

Peter’s speech on the day of Pentecost provides us with a good example of the apostolic method of dealing with the Old Testament messianic “prophecies.” In Acts 2:23 Peter refers to “the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” that the Jews would deliver up Jesus to be crucified. Then he refers to a Davidic psalm, Psalm 16, saying that David was speaking “of him,” that is, of Jesus (Acts 2:25). Turning back to Psalm 16, I find nothing at all that would indicate to Old Testament readers that this psalm was pointing forward to the Messiah. It appears simply to be a psalm of thanksgiving for the fact that God has preserved his own. True, the psalm is royal and Davidic, thus linking it loosely with the messianic tradition, but for us to accept that the psalmist wanted his readers to think of *the* Messiah is hardly a conclusion that we can draw on the basis of the Old Testament. Yet Peter makes the statement: “David says concerning him” – and by “him,” Peter clearly means Jesus the Messiah. Now judged by our way of thinking we might be inclined to say that Peter was wrong. But such a conclusion does not take in to account the accepted methods of Peter’s day. Peter was not wrong; he was simply, making use of the Jewish methodology described above which allows the inclusion of later events in earlier passages. Peter can actually go on to say that David was a prophet (Acts 2:30), and that he “foresaw” and “spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, and that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption” (Acts 2:31). He uses all the language of prophecy. And that can cause us great difficulty if we do not realize how earlier passages can be made to “prophesy” in the light of later events simply by the use of good Jewish methodology. In other words, it is essential that we recognize how the word “prophecy” could be very much expanded in the first century after Christ so that it could refer, not just to foresight, but to hindsight as well. Such an understanding of “prophecy” provides the clue for understanding the great number of messianic citations in the New Testament which simply do not seem to be predictions in their original Old Testament setting. I would include here the citations out of Psalm 69 in the Gospel of John which we noted earlier. The original passages were not predictions, but the first century methodology made it possible to turn them into such. New Testament writers “found” many such “prophecies” and obviously did not hesitate to use them for the New Testament is full of them.

In this connection it would be well to note how conservative Christians have often reacted against the conclusions of modern scholars who initially may have had nothing more sinister in

mind than simply to call attention to the fact that the Old Testament passages do not say to us what the New Testament writers understood them to say to them. A modern scholar might say: “Psalm 16:10 does not really predict the resurrection of Christ.” To which the conservative response has often been: “Yet it must, for the New Testament says it does.” Without an understanding of the Jewish methods behind the New Testament quotations, the choice would appear to be between scholarship and piety: if we accept the scholarly point of view, we must reject the New Testament; to accept the New Testament point of view, we must reject the scholarly position. Such a stark dichotomy can be avoided if we understand, first, how God has worked in Scripture, and second, how first century Jews interpreted the Old Testament.

I should further emphasize that a belief in the resurrection of Christ does not at all depend on the use of a particular Old Testament text. The resurrection stands on the basis of the New Testament narrative just as we noted earlier that the Virgin Birth is established on the basis of Matthew, not Isaiah. To be sure, the New Testament writers constantly bring these additional passages into use, but they must be seen as additional proofs for a Jewish audience, not as primary evidence for twentieth century readers. We need not sacrifice a single cardinal point of faith; we simply need to be careful that we use the reasons that are most likely to be cogent for our day when we seek to establish those teachings that are important for the Christian faith. As noted earlier, at different times and in different places, different arguments have carried more weight. We must still recognize that these different arguments have been used by men of God, men who were under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Yet if we are truly guided by the Spirit today, we will not force someone to accept an argument as primary evidence when that argument could be effective only in a quite different culture. When I finally came to understand that point, I made my peace with the writers of the New Testament. They have been good friends of mine ever since.

Before we turn to the fourth and last category of prophecies, we should note how the understanding of a particular word in the New Testament can provide a more specific explanation for a number of passages that have been called “prophecies” by Christian interpreters. The key word is “fulfill,” one that is particularly prominent in the Gospels. We have already noted the use of this word in several contexts, most notably in connection with the Virgin Birth and Isaiah 7:14/Matt 1:2-23. But for purposes of illustrating the use of this word, I would like to suggest a comparison between Hosea 11:1 and Matthew 2:15.

The verse in Matthew describes the flight of Jesus and his parents into Egypt. The passage concludes with the following statement: “This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt have I called my son’” (Matt. 2:15). At first glance the modern reader might suspect that Matthew is referring to an Old Testament prophecy of the first type, namely, one that clearly predicts the coming of the Messiah to the Old Testament reader. But when we turn to Hosea 11:1, we discover something quite different, for there the passage is clearly referring to the departure of Israel from Egypt at the time of the Exodus. How could that experience predict the coming of Christ to the reader? In the first instance, we must recognize that, at least in part, Matthew is again using typical Jewish methodology in reading later events back into earlier passages. Note, however, that in this instance Matthew does not use the term “prophecy,” though many later Christian interpreters have not hesitated to do so, contributing to the confusion that we have already discussed. But even though the background of Jewish methodology can be helpful in understanding Matthew’s general approach, the really significant

clue to understanding this type of “prophecy” is found in the word “fulfill.” Behind this word lies a Greek word *pleroo* which means “to fill full” as well as “to fulfill.” Selecting the first meaning of the word instead of the second, we could roughly paraphrase what Matthew is saying as follows: “Those ancient words of the prophet describing how God brought his son out of Egypt have now been filled full of fresh new meaning in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.” Thus, instead of a prediction which is brought to pass and so “fulfilled,” this way of understanding Matthew sees rather an old stories whose words are filled full of fresh new meaning, meaning which, quite literally, had never been thought of before.

This usage of the word “fulfill” can be illustrated also from Matt. 5:17 where Jesus says that he has not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. He then proceeds to show just how he has come to fill the law full of meaning. The law says, for example, “You shall not kill.” But when we fill the law full of its true meaning we learn that we should not even hate (Matt. 5:21-22). By understanding the word “fulfill” in this way, we can view many of the Old Testament passages, not as predictions which were fulfilled, but as words that have been filled full of a new and even quite different meaning in the new situation in Jesus Christ.

Briefly summarizing the implications of our discussion of this third category of messianic “prophecies,” we note the following points. First, we must recognize that God works with human beings within their own environment; his inspired spokespersons reflect their human background and training. Having recognized this, we can then move on to the second point, our understanding of the environment of the first century after Christ. It should be clear from our discussion that rabbinical interpretation of Scripture was often based on methods which seem quite foreign to us. This is particularly noticeable in the tendency to read later events back into earlier narratives. This Jewish background is the explanation for the remarkable “proofs” sometimes cited by New Testament writers. A third and more specific point, is the usage of the term “fulfill.” Against the general background of Jewish methodology, the New Testament writers often spoke of later experiences filling old words full of new meaning. Thus “fulfill” does not really refer to a prediction coming to pass, but to an old narrative coming to life in a new way.

With this look at the New Testament era, we are now prepared to move further afield and note the even later “discoveries” of additional messianic “prophecies.”

4. Prophecies understood as messianic in later Christian centuries

In this last category of “messianic” prophecies we will simply note a couple of “prophecies” that have been much used through several centuries of Christian interpretation. One such prophecy is the so-called *Protevangelium* (first gospel) of Genesis 3:15: “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, between thy seed and her seed. It shall bruise thy head, but thou shalt bruise his heel.” This classic KJV rendering is very familiar to Christian ears. In the light of the New Testament imagery of the “seed” (Christ) and the serpent (Satan), this passage has been taken as intimating the great cosmic struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, the conflict between Christ and Satan. The hints are there in the passage, but neither the Old Testament nor the New picked up this passage and applied it to Christ; the application was to come after the close of the canon to Scripture.

One other later discovery of significance is the prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27. Modern

scholarship has tended to deny that Daniel was written in the sixth century, preferring a date close to the time of the Maccabean revolt (c. 165 BC). Such an approach tends to see Daniel not as genuine prophecy, but as history written as prophecy. Conservative Christians, however, have insisted that the book is indeed prophecy, though even so their interpretations have varied considerably. The arguments need not detain us here for our primary purpose is to look at the history of interpretation of Daniel. In this connection, we note that the prophecy of Daniel 9 came to be seen by many Christians as the most important of all messianic prophecies, a prophecy not just of the coming of the Messiah, but of the time of his coming as well. Sir Isaac Newton, for example, in his commentary on Daniel declared that this prophecy was the “cornerstone” of the Christian faith.

The basis for this interpretation and the considerable variation in dates adopted by different interpreters provide fertile ground for research, but for our purposes it is sufficient to note that the key phrase is found in Daniel 9:27, rendered by the KJV as follows: “And in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease.” When applied to Jesus Christ, this passage is taken to refer to the death of Christ on the cross and the end of the sacrificial system.

Now even though Christians have claimed that this prophecy is a chief “cornerstone” of the faith, the history of interpretation indicates that it only *gradually* took its place as a cornerstone, for certainly there is little evidence in Scripture or in the early Jewish writings to suggest that this prophecy was used to predict the time or the mission of Jesus. About two hundred years after the birth of Christ, Clement of Alexandria (d. 220) and Tertullian (d. 240), two fathers of the Christian church, did apply the prophecy to the incarnation and death of Christ, but these early interpreters tended to see the prophecy ending at or around AD 70, the time of Jerusalem's destruction by the Romans. The history of the interpretation of Daniel 9:24-27 is a fascinating one, but for our purposes we simply need to emphasize the fact that here is a prophecy which the Christian community “discovered” many years after Jesus’ earthly ministry. Nevertheless, it has brought a great deal of comfort and encouragement to God’s people.

So at the end of our survey, we can affirm that the messianic hope is one that has remained constant through the ages, first in the Old Testament as God’s people looked forward with increasing eagerness to the one who was to come. Then, in the person of Jesus Christ, at least some of the Jewish community recognized the One who had come as their Redeemer. Many rejected this gentle man who said that he had come to die for their sins. But many found in him the source of life. These have carried the good news throughout the world, and the word is still being spread abroad today. We may not find equally convincing all the reasons that have been used through the ages to establish the conviction that Jesus of Nazareth was the embodiment of the Old Testament hope. But we should be able to see how God has used many and varied ways to build faith in the hearts of his people.

Recognizing that God has indeed used a great variety of ways in working with man has made it possible for me to build my house of faith on more solid rock. Now when the winds blow, I don’t have to be afraid. That has not only been a great relief, but a cause for great joy. Perhaps that is also one of the reasons why I like to think of the hope of the Messiah as the best story in the Old Testament as well as in the New, and indeed anywhere else you might care to look. It is good news that is worth sharing.

Theme: Playing God

Leading Question: To what extent is God’s violence in the Old Testament linked to the fact that he is dealing with violent people?

This week’s lesson includes a broad sweep of experiences, most of it tinged with violent divine reactions against other nations. Though the assigned passages for this week only deal with divine judgment against Babylon, the “oracles against the nations” also include Assyria, Philistia, Moab, Damascus, and Ethiopia. Then after an astonishing interlude which brings Egypt, Assyria, and Israel together as God’s children (Isa.19:18-24), the diatribes continue Egypt and Ethiopia, against Babylon, Edom and Arabia, against Jerusalem, and finally against Babylon, Edom and Arabia, and Tyre. And all of these judgments are heavy-handed. A careful reading of the oracles indicate that Judah comes in for sharp criticism, too. Especially is that the case in the oracle against Damascus (Isa. 17). But for our purposes here, the involvement of God’s people in the judgments is not so crucial. And what is particularly interesting is the nearly universal good news that comes in Isaiah 19.

Question: How does one explain the buoyant good news of 19:18-24, that celebrates the common salvific ground of Israel, Egypt, and Assyria? That is astonishing enough to be included here:

18 On that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the Lord of hosts. One of these will be called the City of the Sun.

19 On that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the center of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border. 20 It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a savior, and will defend and deliver them. 21 The Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the Lord on that day, and will worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them. 22 The Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them.

23 On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.

24 On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, 25 whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.”

Comment: Just as the judgments in Isaiah seem extra-ordinarily harsh, so the moments of good news seem extra-ordinarily good. Here Israel's great enemies, Assyria and Egypt, become one with Israel: "Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage" (Isa. 19:25)

Lucifer and Satan in Isaiah 14

The Old Testament contain two passages that Christians have interpreted as giving us the early history of Satan: Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28. Interestingly enough, in the history of biblical interpretation, neither was applied to the history of Satan until well into the Christian era. The Lucifer passage (Isa. 14:12-15), was not applied to Satan until Tertullian (CE 240). A chapter from Alden Thompson's *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?* "Whatever happened to Satan in the Old Testament?" follows this lesson. It explores the issue more thoroughly.

Question: Given the progression of ideas that move toward greater clarity in Jesus Christ, should we not expect to find many a number of concepts that become clearer in the NT than in the OT?

Babylon and Rome: A New Testament Perspective

The official Sabbath School study guide includes this question:

Why does "Babylon" later refer to Rome (1 Pet. 5:13) and to an evil power in the book of Revelation (Rev. 14:8; 16:19; Rev. 17:5; Rev. 18:2, 10, 21)?

Comment: Adventists have generally adopted the classic Protestant approach to eschatology (last day) events known as "historicism," which traces the events of history on a time-line, with one specific event marking the progress through history to the end of time. Liberals typically adopt a "preterist" approach to last day passages, seeing them as applying only to the author's day and often denying the idea of predictive prophecy. Evangelicals/fundamentalists go to the opposite extreme and project all unfulfilled prophecies into the future (futurism), which can result in some curious applications of Scripture. Taking the last chapter of Zechariah as the clue, futurists actually project animal sacrifices as a part of God's plan during the 1000 years.

With the passage of time, the 1844 "Great Disappointment" led Adventists to adopt the idea of "conditional" prophecy, which allows for the possibility of multiple applications. The phrase "applied historicism" is an attempt to preserve the truths affirmed in historicism, while allowing for additional "applications." And the book of Revelation does just that, speaking of "Babylon" as a secret code for Rome. In other words, if the shoe fits, wear it! Any power that acts like ancient "Babylon" can earn that label for itself! Indeed, a personal application is also possible. Look in the mirror: Are you acting like coercive and/or deceptive power of Rome? Then, you, too can be called Babylon.

Destruction, Restoration, Destruction

In Isaiah 24-27, a number of themes appear that are seen in a clearer light in the New Testament. Isaiah 24, for example describes the desolation of the earth in words that seem to be describing the desolation of the earth during the 1000 years of Revelation. Similarly, Isaiah 25:8-9 provides a wonderful description of the new earth:

“He will swallow up death forever.
Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.
It will be said on that day,
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
This is the Lord for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation” (NRSV).

But as we continue to read this section of Isaiah, we know we are not yet in the new earth because immediately following this buoyant passage, the prophet reverts to strong condemnation of Moab:

“The Moabites shall be trodden down in their place
as straw is trodden down in a dung-pit.
Though they spread out their hands in the midst of it,
as swimmers spread out their hands to swim,
their pride will be laid low despite the struggle of their hands.
The high fortifications of his walls will be brought down,
laid low, cast to the ground, even to the dust” (Isaiah 25:10b – 12, NRSV).

Question: Given the convictions of devout conservatives, what is the best way to help believers see the differences between the testaments while strengthening a sense of their underlying unity?

Chapter 3, “Whatever happened to Satan in the Old Testament?”
Alden Thompson, *Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament God?* (1988, 1989, 2000, 2003, 2011)
Available from www.Amazon.com and www.adventistbookcenter.com

CHAPTER 3

Whatever happened to Satan in the Old Testament?

*Now the serpent was more subtle than any other
wild creature that the Lord God had made. –
Genesis 3:1*

If the suggestion developed in the last chapter is correct, it would be quite appropriate to say that God created a good world, but let it go wild. If he is a freedom-loving God, his creatures must have the right to rebel, in spite of all the tragic consequences that can come from such a course. But then God seeks to win his creatures back. He meets them where they are and seeks to draw them step by step along a better path.

All that sounds fine – until I actually turn to the Old Testament. There I find descriptions of God’s activity that make me very uncomfortable. At first sight, some of the incidents seem to suggest that he is not a freedom-loving God after all, but is quite arbitrary. Let’s note some of the more disturbing problems.

In the story of the Exodus from Egypt, the biblical account says on more than one occasion that “God hardened Pharaoh’s heart” (Ex. 7:3; 9:12). Now that sounds like something much more appropriate to Satan than to a good God. Why would God want to harden a man’s heart, setting him on a self-destructive course which would also bring others to ruin? Taken at face value, the words present a real problem for those of us who claim that God is good.

A story that is perhaps even more curious is found in 2 Samuel 24. It deals with a census ordered by King David. Although the biblical story does not offer an explanation, David was apparently keen to find out just how large an army he could field, an act that would have been seen in that era as stemming from wrongful pride. Even his crusty general Joab knew such a course to be wrong (2 Sam. 24:3), but David went ahead. According to the story in 2 Samuel, even though David belatedly confessed his sin, the Lord announced to David through the prophet Gad, that punishment was on the way, though David would have the “privilege” of choosing the mode of punishment. All that seems a bit strange to us, but the most difficult part of the whole story is the introduction which explains God’s role in the incident: “Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them saying ‘Go, number Israel and Judah’” (2 Sam. 24: 1). Then as noted above, the Lord punished David for his act (2 Sam. 24:10 ff). Now how could a good God actually incite a wrong act which that same God would then proceed to punish? From our point of view the story is inexplicable.

Moving to a slightly different type of incident, we could list numerous examples of God’s stepping in and directly administering punishment. We might be more comfortable with a view which says that God *allows* the sinner to receive the punishment which his sin merits. Why does God have to wade in with his own scorpions and serpents? Does not sin bring its own

punishment? One example should be sufficient to illustrate the point. Numbers 21 describes one of Israel's repeated rebellions. Rather than providing a picture of a God who reluctantly allows his people to flaunt his protecting care, to be pummeled about by the harsh realities of life, the biblical writer gives us a quick glimpse of the anger of the Lord: "Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people so that many people of Israel died" (Num. 21:6). This type of description has led some to conclude that the Old Testament God is indeed arbitrary: "If you don't do it my way, I'll send out my serpents to bite you." Some Christians react against such a picture, while others actually use these very passages to shore up an authoritarian view of religious life: "Don't ask any questions. Do it because say so."

Now in each of the examples noted above, if I simply take the words at face value without placing the incidents in a larger framework, the resultant view of the Old Testament God can be a harsh one indeed. That is why it is so important to develop the overall framework within which we can interpret the Old Testament. In the last chapter I suggested that the great degeneracy evident in the Old Testament is to be understood against the background of a great cosmic struggle between good and evil. That the universe may be more secure in the end, God provides the freedom necessary for evil to develop. The process is slow and dangerous when viewed from a human point of view and it seems as though God is taking great risks with his reputation. But the end result is the vindication of God against all the accusations of his Adversary.

Yet even if one accepts that type of framework within which one may interpret the Old Testament, one of the great surprises in the actual reading of Scripture is the very poor publicity which the Adversary receives in the Old Testament. In fact, if I were in his place I think I would complain rather vigorously. There are hints of his activities in such places as Genesis 3 and of course in the book of Job, but if you really make a careful search of the Old Testament, specific references to the demonic, to Satan, or the Devil are very sparse indeed. As a matter of fact, a concordance will reveal only three passages in all of the Old Testament where a specific demonic being named Satan appears: Job 1-2, 1 Chron. 21:1, and Zech. 3:1-2. Traditional Christian theology assigns a fairly significant role to Satan, and he certainly is quite prominent in the New Testament. Why then does he have such a low profile in the Old Testament?

Before exploring the possible reasons for Satan's infrequent appearance in the Old Testament, we need to take a closer look at the Old Testament word for "Satan." The English word "Satan" is in fact a straight transliteration of the Hebrew word *Satan*. And though the word normally suggests to us a supreme evil personality, Satan with a capital "S," the earlier Old Testament usage applies the term to any "adversary" or "accuser." For example, when Solomon turned away from God, "The Lord raised up an *adversary (satan)* against Solomon, Hadad the Edomite" (I Kings 11:14). The RSV has translated the Hebrew word *satan* as "adversary" and it clearly refers to a human being. Likewise, when the Philistines went up to battle against Israel, a number of the leaders were reluctant to have David join them, even though he had been living in their midst: "Lest in the battle he become an *adversary (satan)* to us" (1 Sam. 29:4). So David could turn into a *satan*! But perhaps the most fascinating use of the word is in the story of Balaam. There the angel of the Lord opposed Balaam and "took his stand in the way as his *adversary (satan)*" (Num. 22:22). Thus the biblical writers could apply the word *satan* to Hadad, an enemy of Solomon, to David, and to the angel of the Lord. But in each of these incidents the word simply means something like "adversary" as most of our English translations indicate.

In the later use of the term, biblical writers begin to think of a supreme Adversary, *the*

Satan with a capital “S,” representing the great opponent of God. But many Bible scholars hold that even in the three Old Testament passages where the Hebrew word *satan* clearly refers to an individual superhuman adversary, the English word “satan” should still be written with a lower case “s.” The seeds of the New Testament understanding of Satan are clearly there, but Satan’s supreme status as chief of all demons is not yet really clear.

Now when we cite evidence suggesting that the Old Testament understanding of Satan developed gradually, we need to remind ourselves that God has not given all truths to all men at all times. If Old Testament people have fallen far from God, then we must not expect everyone everywhere to have the same understanding. The Old Testament was written over a long period of time and this is reflected in the way that the various writers describe God’s activities. A single event may be described by two later writers, both quite removed in time from the original event. The emphasis and interpretation of each writer will reflect his own special circumstances and, at times, two accounts may even appear to be contradictory. But if we make the necessary adjustments for time and place, we can discover the underlying harmony that is important for understanding God’s activities. Perhaps the best examples of differing emphasis and interpretation is provided in the comparison between Samuel-Kings and Chronicles in the Old Testament, and in the comparison of the gospels in the New.

Now as far as Satan’s role in the Old Testament is concerned, both Jewish and Christian writers have assumed the presence of Satan in many biblical incidents even though the original account without Satan and the later interpretation with Satan can be very useful. One writer has simply chosen to define the role of the demonic, while the other has elected to focus on the omnipotence of God.

If, however, the demonic is indeed a force to be reckoned with in life, the existence of the Devil cannot depend on whether or not a given writer mentions him. Either Satan has been at work in the history of this world or he has not. Without question, traditional Christian doctrine assigns a definite role to Satan. Hence the pertinence of the question: Whatever has happened to Satan in the Old Testament?

DANGERS OF EMPHASIZING THE DEMONIC

As a first step in answering that question, perhaps we could ask about the possible dangers that might arise in a primitive society from an emphasis on the demonic. By looking at various primitive cultures where the demonic plays a much more visible role, we can discover some interesting implications. Pagan religions are often dominated by fear. By definition, demons or evil deities cannot be trusted, so primitive people took all manner of superstitious precautions to protect themselves from the demonic. In ancient Israel, however, the use of magic and consultation with ‘wizards that peep and mutter’ was strictly forbidden (cf. Lev. 19:31; Isa. 8:19). Israel’s God could be trusted. Such trust, however, was not possible when the authority of demons held sway.

From a more strictly theological point of view, an active awareness of the demonic runs the risk of developing into polytheism or dualism. Ancient Israel emerged from a thoroughly polytheistic society in Egypt. Had God chosen to highlight the role of a satanic figure, the condition of the people could have made dualism, if not polytheism, a likely threat to the purity of the faith that God was seeking to establish. Thus the wording of the first command at Sinai

may be more significant than a superficial reading might suggest: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3). Note that in this instance, God does not expressly deny the existence of other gods. He simply asks that Israel worship him exclusively. Other passages in Scripture greatly ridicule the worship of other gods and the worship of idols (cf. Deut. 29:16-17; Is. 44:9-20), but the evidence from the Old Testament is that the people in general had a difficult time focusing their attention on the one true God. Even when they were right with him, the threat of neighboring deities was a real one. Thus, for practical reasons, God treated Israel very much as a wise father might treat a young son if the two of them were to set out on a jaunt through the woods. To warn a small lad of wildcats, bears, and snakes, could be quite unsettling. So the father simply says: “Trust me. Whatever happens, I will take care of it.”

That is very much what I see happening at Sinai and in much of the Old Testament. The first great step that God asked Israel to take was: “Worship the one God who brought you out of Egypt.” The knowledge about Satan would have to come later when their faith was more stable. And this late appearance of Satan seems to be precisely what we find in the Old Testament, for as we look at the three Old Testament passages where a specific *Satan* is mentioned as God’s opponent, in each case, the passage appears in a book that was either written or canonized late in the Old Testament period. But the question of early and late and the matter of canonization requires at least a brief explanation before we proceed.

CAN WE DATE OLD TESTAMENT MATERIAL?

Any attempt actually to date Old Testament material is fraught with difficulty, for the Old Testament books themselves give very little direct information about the time of writing. The only clear-cut dating material comes from the prophetic books where specific prophetic oracles are often assigned to the reign of a specific king (e.g. Jer. 25:1; 26:1; 27:1). But a great many of the Old Testament books remain anonymous. In some cases earlier stories are retold, as when the book of Chronicles retells some of the stories from Samuel and Kings. But how do we know that Chronicles is retelling the stories of Kings and not the other way around? That is particularly a problem for the uninitiated reader who happens to be reading in Kings and finds references to the “Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah” (cf. 1 Kings 14:30). In this particular instance a more careful reading of the books of Kings and Chronicles clearly suggests that Kings comes before Chronicles and that the “chronicles” mentioned in Kings are official court records, not our book of Chronicles in the Old Testament.

One of the more helpful ways at arriving at early and late for all of the biblical books, at least in a very general way, is to look at the canon of Scripture as held by the ancient Hebrews. Where the indications of the time of writing are slim, the place of a book within the canon can be enlightening. That term “canon,” however, also requires at least a brief explanation.

In its early usage, the word “canon” simply means “rule” or “norm.” With reference to Scripture it means those books accepted by a particular community as authoritative, the books providing the norm or rule by which the community chooses to live. Other books may be held to be just as “true” and in some cases just as “inspired,” but for reasons that are seldom known to us, the community did not accept them as canonical, that is, as permanently authoritative. Presumably there are sayings of Isaiah and Jeremiah, of Paul and of Jesus which did not find their way into our Scriptures, but are just as true and just as “inspired” as the ones which did, or

at least the early recipients of those words would have held them just as true and just as “inspired.”

Protestant Christians generally accept the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments as their canon. Roman Catholics accept certain of the so-called Apocryphal books in addition. The Jewish believers accept only the thirty-nine Old Testament books (twenty-four by their reckoning), and even within those books the Jewish community sees different levels of authority, depending on the section in which a book appears. And that is the part that is of particular interest to us.

A New Testament reference actually identifies the three major sections of the Hebrew canon: “the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms” (Luke 24:44). The process by which God worked among his people to designate particular books as “Scripture” is one that will always remain mysterious. We must simply admit that the Spirit led the community of God’s people to recognize certain books as containing the word of the Lord in a way that would be enduring for all time. The Old Testament canon was certainly complete by New Testament times as Luke 24:44 suggests. Furthermore, scholars would generally assign the following, dates for each of the three sections: 400 BC for the Law (Genesis through Deuteronomy); 200 BC for the second section, the Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea-Malachi); and 100 BC for the third section, the Writings (designated in Luke by its largest book, Psalms: Ruth, Ezra to Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Daniel, Chronicles). These dates are really just educated guesses; the canonization of the various sections may have been complete earlier or later, but for our purposes it is significant to note that canonization took place in three steps and that it took place over a period of time.

It is also important to remember that canonization is not particularly concerned with authorship. A book may have been written long before it was canonized or a book may tell a story that happened many centuries before the book was finally accepted as canonical. At least the process of canonization gives us some guide as to when the community was willing to accept a particular book as authoritative for all time.

Now let us return to the three Old Testament passages which mention Satan and look at them in the light of the statement made earlier, namely, that the books in which these passages occur were either written or were canonized towards the end of the Old Testament period. A comment on each passage might prove helpful.

SATAN AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

1 Chronicles 21:1 Of the three passages, this one is in some ways the most important and interesting because it is part of the retelling of the story of David’s census mentioned at the beginning of this chapter (2 Samuel 24). Not only is Chronicles in the third section of the Hebrew canon, but it is also the very last book in the Hebrew Bible. Hence it contains the very last interpretation of Old Testament material. And, in fact, the book of Chronicles is just that, a final interpretation of the period of the monarchy. In the course of retelling that story, the biblical writer makes a startling modification to the story of David’s census. The earlier account said that the LORD (Yahweh) was responsible for the census, but in Chronicles, “*Satan* stood up against Israel, and incited David to number Israel” (1 Chron. 21:1). The inspired writer now sees that an Adversary was responsible for the evil deed, and not the Lord, a remarkable difference indeed.

Now if we are too concerned about harmonizing biblical accounts, we may miss the significance of this passage, so let us pause just a moment to consider the implications. There is a sense in which both passages can be seen to be true. If God is truly all-powerful, then he is ultimately responsible for everything that happens. Both the author of Chronicles and the author of Samuel would most assuredly agree with that. But whereas the earlier author was still operating with the view that the Lord is the *active cause* of everything, the later writer sees evil events happening with the *permission* of the Lord. Perhaps an illustration can clarify the point: instead of taking whip in hand to punish the children for munching green apples, the Lord allows them to receive the stomach ache which is the appropriate reward for eating forbidden fruit. And there is quite a difference in those two approaches.

I am much more comfortable with the way that 1 Chronicles tells the story, but I must also recognize the implications of the story as told in 2 Samuel, namely, that the Lord was willing to assume full responsibility for evil. Perhaps the reason was, as suggested above, his pastoral concern for his people. And if the Lord was willing thus to portray himself as responsible for evil, then suddenly we have a handle for understanding a whole group of problem passages in the Old Testament, including the hardening of Pharaoh's heart and the sending of the serpents. There is a sense in which the Lord is still responsible for all that happens; but now I have a biblical basis for saying that he *permits* instead of *causes* evil, even in those passages where he is actual described as causing it.

Now some may be uncomfortable with this approach and might suggest that I am putting my own interpretation on the words instead of taking the Bible "just as it reads." I will admit that I have put an interpretation on the biblical account. Upon reflection, we would probably all admit that every single word in Scripture, in fact, every word everywhere, must be interpreted. No word or sentence has meaning by itself. It is always read by a person with a particular background and infused with particular meaning. That is why "father" can mean something quite different to me from what it does to someone else. When I hear the word "father." I think of my Dad and have a very positive picture. But someone with a cruel father would see things quite differently.

So we must interpret Scripture. We have no choice. That is why the Christian admonition to approach Scripture always in the attitude of prayer is so very important. If I do not seek the Lord and ask him to guide me into the knowledge of himself, I will certainly misinterpret and misapply Scripture. When I come to interpret his Word I must use all the mental machinery that I can muster, but whether or not I use that machinery in the proper manner depends on my vision of God. It is not a question of faith or reason, but rather, whether or not I will choose to use my reason faithfully.

Now my reason tells me that there is a difference between 2 Samuel 24:1 and 1 Chronicles 21:1. The more I have reflected on that difference, the more significant it has become. As a matter of fact, you could perhaps "blame" this entire book on those two verses. At least it would be safe to say that these two verses provided the catalyst for the method of interpretation which I am suggesting in the book. That was why I said earlier that, of the three passages which mention Satan in the Old Testament, 1 Chronicles 21:1 is the most significant one. That was a personal testimony.

Zechariah 3:1-2 This passage requires only a short comment. Although the book of Zechariah is in the second section of the Hebrew canon, the book itself provides the information

which allows us to say that it was one of the very last of the prophetic books. In fact, it was written well after the close of the Babylonian exile. In this passage, Satan appears as the adversary of Joshua. The setting is evidently a judgment scene; the Lord rebukes the Adversary, restoring Joshua to right standing. Hence the passage provides a helpful illumination of the cosmic antagonism: the Lord is for us; the Adversary is against us. In the end, good triumphs as the Lord rebukes the Adversary and restores his people.

Job 1:6-12;2:1-7 These verses in Job are certainly the best known of all the Old Testament passages which mention Satan. Scripture nowhere tells us who wrote the book of Job or when it was written, More traditional Christian writers have often tended to adopt the dominant Jewish tradition about the book, namely, that Moses was its author. Actually, Jewish speculation about the book was wide-ranging. When the rabbis discussed the question of when Job lived, they propounded suggestions that ranged all the way from the time of the great patriarch Abraham to the post-exilic Persian period and the time of Esther. In fact, the rabbi who suggested that Job was a contemporary of Esther used a clever piece of logic which is likely to elude anyone who has not been immersed in rabbinic logic: Job lived in the time of Ahasuerus because the book of Job says that Job's daughters were the fairest in all the land. When was the time of fair women? The time of Esther. Therefore, Job lived at the time of Esther. [See the Babylonian Talmud: *Baba Bathra 15b*, English translation by the Soncino Press London.] Perhaps it is not difficult to see why the tradition of Mosaic authorship seemed more convincing.

Regardless of who wrote the book, it appears in the third section of the Hebrew canon, suggesting that it was not accepted as authoritative until very late in the biblical period. The story itself bears every mark of being a most ancient one and perhaps it was the very mention of Satan that proved a hindrance to its general acceptance since Satan is not explicitly mentioned in the Law, and only once in a late prophetic book. Yet you will notice that Satan actually makes a very limited appearance even in the book of Job, a point which merits further comment.

One of the fascinating aspects of the book of Job lies in the fact that Job himself, his wife, and his friends, apparently know nothing of the satanic attack; at least there is no evidence for such knowledge in the book itself. Furthermore, when Job begins to realize the seriousness of his problem and when his friends attempt to needle him into repenting of his sins, sins which were non-existent from Job's point of view, Job argues with God, not with Satan. He clearly sees God as the author of his difficulties (cf. Job 16:7-17; 19:6-13). Even in one of the passages where Satan does appear, God says to Satan: "You moved me against him, to destroy him without cause" (Job 2:3). So in the book of Job, the figure of Satan makes only a very cautious appearance. God is still responsible for what happens, and all the primary actors in the drama see God as all in all.

In looking a little more closely at the two passages where Satan does appear in Job, we must recognize how important the structure of the book is for its interpretation. The book of Job consists of a prose prologue (1-2) and a prose epilogue (42:7-17). In between is the poetic body of the book, consisting of a lively dialogue between Job and "friends" (3-31), a monologue by the young man Elihu (32-37), followed by the divine response out of the whirlwind (38-42:1-6). In the prologue there are five separate scenes, three depicting Job's situation on earth, interspersed with the two heavenly scenes where Satan and God discuss Job's integrity. Taking away scenes two and four, the ones where Satan appears, leaves the world scene as Job saw it. Only the addition of these two scenes gives the setting of the cosmic struggle between God and his

Adversary, between good and evil. As is the case with every disaster scene in the earth, the causes and responsibility for the events are terribly difficult to untangle. We sometimes suffer because we deserve to, but often the troubles seem so undeserved. The book of Job attempts to provide some framework for handling the problem: a cosmic struggle in which the very character of God is under attack. We have already seen some evidence thus far in our discussion as to just how significant the cosmic struggle is for the method that I am suggesting one should use in approaching the Old Testament. The forces of evil must have their day in court if God is going to win in the end.

Before moving on to further implications of the disappearance of Satan from the Old Testament, I would like to comment just briefly on those passages in the Old Testament which do not explicitly mention Satan, but which have been interpreted within the Christian community as applying to Satan: Genesis 3; Isaiah 14:12-15; and Ezekiel 28:11-19.

In Genesis 3, an unbiased reader will strongly suspect the animosity which exists between the serpent and God, pointing in the direction of a full-fledged Adversary relationship. But the serpent figure is, in fact, an ambiguous one in the Old Testament. The serpent attack recorded in Numbers 21 is successfully warded off by Moses' raising a brass serpent, the later symbol of the opponent of God! There is even evidence to suggest that the people began to worship this serpent; thus it had to be destroyed (2 Kings 18:4).

The first clear identification of the serpent as Satan in Judeo-Christian writings does not come until Revelation 12:9. There there is no doubt: the Dragon, the Serpent, the Devil, and Satan are all one and the same. Considering the strong role that the serpent plays in Christian interpretation, it is perhaps surprising that his identity is never really clarified in the Old Testament. An explanation might lie in the fact that in Egypt, the serpent is both a symbol of a good deity and of an evil one. The biblical writers thus could not really develop the serpent motif without raising the specter of dualism or something worse.

Turning to Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:11-19, we find two passages which share several similar characteristics. Both passages have been applied to the "prehistory" of Satan and both appear in prophetic oracles or "taunt-songs" against heathen kings. Isaiah 14 is directed against the king of Babylon; Ezekiel 28 is directed against the prince or king of Tyre. Modern scholarship has been very much intrigued with the parallels between these passages and similar passages in the literature of other Ancient Near Eastern cultures. Two general conclusions can be drawn from the research done on these passages. First, that the parallels in pagan cultures are striking indeed; second, that the prophets themselves are speaking of the historical enemies of Israel, not of the supernatural realm. The supernatural appears only by way of analogy. In other words, most modern scholars would say that these prophetic oracles would not have been understood by an Old Testament audience as describing Satan. That conclusion seems to be verified by the fact that the first clear application of the Lucifer passage, Isaiah 14:12-15, to Satan, was not made until the time of Tertullian, a church father who died in AD 240.

The history of the interpretation of Ezekiel 28:11-19 is less clear, for the passage has been applied not only to a supernatural being, but to the first man as well (cf. RSV), a problem of interpretation which stems from ambiguity in the original text. In any event, the application to Satan was apparently not made until several centuries into the Christian era.

The question naturally arises: is it legitimate to apply these passages to Satan when such was apparently not the intent of the original author? That is a difficult question to answer, for

within the Christian tradition, an interpretation has often been drawn from a biblical passage which was clearly not the one intended by the original writer. A second meaning may have been implied but that is quite a different matter from saying that such a meaning was the one intended by the original writer. Nevertheless, as long as we do not use a second application to obscure our study and understanding of the author's original intent, such second meanings can be useful. Certainly if we choose to stand within traditional Christianity we must be willing to admit that such secondary meanings have been very popular within the Christian community, and to a certain extent, we must be resigned to such an approach even if we aren't very happy with it. But the problem has been that such traditional interpretations have often obscured or even replaced the original meaning. I actually suspect that the vehemence with which traditional Christian positions are sometimes attacked is a direct result of Christian reluctance to admit the first meaning of the text. Thus, one of my concerns as I write this book, is to show that it is possible to stand within a conservative Christian tradition and still be able to read the Old Testament for the purpose of discovering its most likely original meaning.

But after admitting that the original intent of Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:11-19 was probably not to outline the pre-history of Satan, I still suspect that Satan is lurking somewhere in those passages. Connected with that suspicion is the probability that the prophets have apparently borrowed from cultures other than their own. We must make it clear, however, that prophets are free to "borrow" whatever they choose and from wherever they might wish. It is the final product that is the result of the divine inspiration, not the bits and pieces. Yet even if that is the case, what right do we have to suspect that pagan religions had bits and pieces of a sort that could be used? That is where I think we ought to take the events of Genesis 3-11 more seriously. Whatever mankind may have originally known about the cosmic struggle would have certainly made its way into pagan cultures and would have come in a distorted fashion to that line of patriarchs which retained the slender thread of the knowledge of the true God. Suddenly, here in prophetic literature, bits and pieces of that cosmic struggle begin to appear, but in a way which does not threaten God's first concern, the development of faith in him as the one true God. Certainly Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:11-19 do define the *issues* of the cosmic struggle, namely, that selfishness and pride are the supreme distortion of the will of God and lead inevitably towards full opposition to God himself. The personality of the Adversary, however, is certainly well hidden behind the mask of his quite human proteges. Perhaps, then, the primary criticism of the Christian usage of these passages stems from the impression that has often been given, that these passages must have clearly outlined in the Old Testament audience the knowledge of God's Adversary. Within the context of the approach of this book, I would say that such a knowledge was still too hot for the Old Testament to handle; it had to come later.

One further passage should perhaps be added here as touching on the demonic in the Old Testament, and that is Leviticus 16, the chapter that describes the ritual of the scapegoat (indicated in the RSV as the goat "for Azazel" – Hebrew, *azazel*). Christian interpretation of this passage has often seen both goats, the one that was sacrificed and the one that was led into the wilderness, as types of Christ. But another interpretation of this passage with ancient as well as modern support suggests that the goat led out for or to Azazel represents a demonic element. This interpretation seems to find fairly early confirmation from the intertestamental book known as 1 Enoch, for when the unknown author of 1 Enoch wished to select a name for the leader of the fallen angelic spirits, he chose the name Azazel. Now if the demonic element was indeed part

of the original ritual, then perhaps here is an additional glimpse of the cosmic struggle between God and his Adversary; one goat was for the Lord and one for Azazel.

But after demonstrating just how little explicit information the Old Testament contains about Satan, we must turn our attention to the way in which the Old Testament writers handled the problem of evil in Satan's absence. Although they would often simply attribute violent acts directly to the Lord, they sometimes softened this picture by depicting other supernatural beings as the active agents in destroying and punishing. These beings belonged to a "heavenly court" which was under the direction of God. The role of this "heavenly court" is something that we must look at more closely.

If Satan's role is not clearly defined in the Old Testament, then we might also expect to find a description of the celestial economy which differs in some respects from the traditional Christian view which builds more directly on New Testament data. Revelation 12:9 provides the essentials of the New Testament view and the one which generally has been adopted in Christian interpretation: Michael and his angels versus the Dragon and his angels. The cosmic struggle is full-blown. In the Old Testament, however, everything must take place under the direction of the one God. Thus the "dragon and his angels" must be seen to be under divine management, though we can still catch glimpses of their misbehavior.

Perhaps an illustration from the human realm would be helpful in describing the difference between the Old Testament view and the New Testament one. In the New Testament, the forces of good seem almost to represent a government in exile; the rulership of this world has been usurped by the dragon, the ruler of this age. The tension is deep, leading to open war, as is evident in the battleground description of Revelation 12. In the Old Testament, however, the situation would perhaps be similar to the tension between two political parties, one in power, the other in opposition. Both still operate within the one government, but the opposition at times betrays signs of disloyalty to government policy. We shall return later to the Old Testament view, but first we need to look at another aspect of the Old Testament which is quite pertinent to our discussion, an aspect which is both intriguing and difficult, the names for God.

OLD TESTAMENT NAMES FOR GOD

As Christians, we are quite accustomed to the view that there is only one God. In my own case, for instance, I was so steeped in this belief, that it was surprising and difficult for me to recognize that for much of the Old Testament period, such a view was not so self-evident. I was aware that Israel's pagan neighbors worshiped other gods, but I had assumed that Israel clearly saw the absoluteness of the one God. To be sure, the Old Testament tells how Israel often turned aside to worship Baal; even with my "high-road" orientation, I recognized that. But what about Israel when she was right with God? How strong were her convictions then? That was the part that I found surprising. For even when Israel was right with God, she apparently tended to look at her God as the God of Israel, but perhaps not really the God of her neighbors. It is in this context that the discussion of the names of God in the Old Testament becomes pertinent.

One of the ten commandments declares that God's name is not to be taken in vain. The later Jewish community was so serious about that command that it decided the safest course would be simply never to utter the name of God at all. That habit of scrupulously avoiding the name of God established a tradition that has continued right down to this very day even in the

Christian community. Thus users of the standard English translations (KJV, RSV, NEB, NIV) always read a substitute for the actual name of Israel's God. The story is a very complex one, but for our purposes we simply need to understand that, given Israel's situation in a world where there were many gods, the simple name "God" was not specific enough for Israel's God. Thus, when God instructed Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt, he gave a personal name for Israel to use when addressing him, their own personal God. Most scholars now agree that this name was originally something like "Yahweh." Some modern translations (e. g, The Jerusalem Bible), actually use this name throughout the Old Testament, adding a most interesting flavor to familiar stories. Thus when we read the Old Testament, we discover that the Philistines had their Dagon, the Moabites had their Chemosh, the Syrians had their Rimmon, but Israel had Yahweh. And Israel also clearly understood that whatever the other nations claimed or believed, she herself was to have no other gods before this Yahweh.

Our modern English Bibles deliberately avoid using the name "Yahweh," but by a very clever method, they do make it possible for the reader to know where an original Yahweh appears in the Hebrew: wherever you find LORD or GOD (written in small capital letters), that indicates the name Yahweh in the original Hebrew Bible. When you find "Lord" applied to God (written with only the first letter capitalized), that is generally a translation of the word *Adonai*, a close equivalent to our English "lord" in that it can refer to God or a human being, depending on the context; any authority figure could be an *adonai*. As for the word "God" (written with only an initial capital), this represents the Hebrew *Elohim*. *Elohim* is like our English word "god" in that it can refer to the one true God or to false gods. But *Elohim* is also peculiar in that it is *plural* in form, so that precisely the same word could signify God, god, or gods, depending on the context. The above distinctions are important and can be quite helpful in illuminating some Old Testament passages; perhaps a diagram would be appropriate:

Usage in English Bibles Application to Hebrew Old Testament

LORD or GOD	= Yahweh, the specific name of Israel's God
Lord	= Adonai, the general for any authority figure, human or divine
God	= Elohim, the general word for "god," plural in form, but can be plural or singular in meaning; only the context determines whether it should be translated as God, god, or gods.

The name "Yahweh" as given to Moses is closely tied up with God's deliverance of his people from Egypt (Ex. 3:13-15; 6:2-8). This name had great potential for reminding Israel of an intimate personal relationship, just as any personal name when used by close friends yields much more warmth than "Mr.," "Mrs.," or "Ms.." *Elohim* could be used to refer to God and was used a great deal, but it was the name "Yahweh" that carried the personal message and was the one name that could never be misunderstood as belonging to another more ordinary god.

But for understanding the way that the Old Testament handles the problem of evil, the word *Elohim* is the important one. In many ways it is almost like our English word "angel," but unlike the common use of our English word "angel." *Elohim* is often used for the supreme God.

In some passages in Scripture, the expression “sons of God” (*Elohim*) shades into the supernatural sense of “angels.” This is quite clearly the case in Job, not only in the prologue where the “sons of the Elohim” met before the Lord, Satan among them (Job 1:6; 2:1), but also in the poetic portion where “sons of God” and “morning stars” are parallel, suggesting supernatural beings who sang at the creation of the earth (Job 28:7).

THE HEAVENLY COURT

It appears that these *Elohim* or sons of the *Elohim* are members of a heavenly court. In Job, Satan was one of these “sons of God” and qualified as a member of the heavenly court even though he was clearly not a wholehearted supporter of the heavenly government. That tension within the heavenly court also occurs in other places in the Old Testament, even when the figure of Satan does not appear. Of particular interest is the story of Micaiah and the false prophets, told both in 1 Kings 22 and in 2 Chronicles 18. Let us note some of the key features.

As the story is told in 1 Kings (the Chronicles version varies little), Jehoshaphat, king of Judah (the southern kingdom) has gone north to join Ahab, king of Israel (the northern kingdom) in an attempt to regain Ramoth-Gilead for Israel from the Syrians. By reputation, Ahab ranks low as a worshiper of the true God, Yahweh, being constantly tempted by his wife’s Baal worship. But the biblical writers generally give Jehoshaphat good marks for his efforts in the service of Yahweh. Why Jehoshaphat decided to link up with the ungodly Ahab is a curious matter, but he had done so. Yet having decided to help Ahab, the king’s religious scruples began to work on his conscience. “We need to inquire from Yahweh, first,” he said. “No problem,” replied Ahab, and he summoned four hundred prophets, all of whom confidently declared “Yahweh will give Ramoth-Gilead into the hand of the king” (1 Kings 22:6).

These four hundred prophets apparently left Jehoshaphat even more uneasy, so he asked if perchance there might possibly be one more prophet. “Well, yes, there is Micaiah,” admitted Ahab. “But I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me, but evil.” Jehoshaphat got his wish, though, and Micaiah arrived, amidst a show of convincing visual aids by one of the other prophets – iron horns to push the Syrians (1 Kings 22:11).

With a touch of sarcasm, Micaiah told the king to go ahead (1 Kings 22:15), but Ahab caught the tone and commanded him to tell the truth. Micaiah did just that, confirming Ahab’s suspicions as to the nature of Micaiah’s prophecies, for he predicted the king’s death. For our purposes, however, what is significant is the way that the heavenly court figures in Micaiah’s reply. Part of Micaiah’s reply is couched in terms of a vision:

I saw Yahweh sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left, and Yahweh said, “Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead?” And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before Yahweh, saying, “I will entice him.” And Yahweh said to him, “By what means?” And he said, “I will go forth, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.” And he said “You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go forth and do so!” Now therefore behold, Yahweh has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these our prophets; Yahweh has spoken evil concerning you (1 Kings 22:19-23).

The parallel with Job is striking, for though the Lord is still clearly responsible for what happens, the actual performance of the evil deed is carried out by a member of the heavenly court. But, of course, there is a notable difference between the experience of Ahab and that of Job, for Job is a blameless and upright man. Such is hardly the case with Ahab, even though the specific deed which precipitated his downfall is not indicated in connection with Micaiah's vision.

From our point of view, the charade of the heavenly court looking for some way to make Ahab fall seems a strange way for the God of the universe to carry on. But that is the beauty of a vision: God can use whatever imagery is necessary to get the point across in a particular circumstance. For ancient Israel, the scene of the heavenly court was very useful, for it maintained the view of the omnipotence of Yahweh, while allowing some of the deeds to be carried out by lesser members of his entourage. The evil spirit who misleads Ahab is not yet cast in the role of a "Satan" who is the "accuser of the brethren," but the picture is not all that far removed from such a view.

This idea of the heavenly court is used for another purpose in the Old Testament, namely to "control" the gods of the other nations. It may be difficult for Christian theologians to visualize the gods of the other nations as something more than mere sticks and stones. Yet even in our modern era, conservative Christians can live quite comfortably with a belief in a demonic kingdom, while at the same time viewing all the gods of the pagans as nonexistent. We probably wouldn't be quite so ready to say that the gods of the pagans were evil angels, but the Old Testament view is perhaps close to that point of view. Let us look at some of the key passages.

At the outset we need to recall a suggestion made earlier, namely, that God did not immediately set himself before Israel as the only true God of the universe. There are many passages in the Old Testament that declare that Yahweh is the only God worthy of the name. The creation account in Genesis 1 and numerous psalms declare that there is one God who made the world and all that is therein. But for the average Israelite the problem was faced at a much lower level: "You shall have no other gods (*Elohim*) before me." Where do the other gods (*Elohim*) fit in? They are the gods (*Elohim*) of the other nations. Yahweh is the *Elohim* in Israel and for Israel; Dagon is the *Elohim* for Philistia, Chemosh is the *Elohim* for Moab, and so on. The biblical evidence for such a position is not extensive, but when brought together it provides a reasonably clear picture.

One of the most fascinating and pertinent passages is Deuteronomy 32:8-9, rendered in the RSV as follows:

When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of men, he fixed the bounds of the people according to the number of the sons of God. For the LORD's (Yahweh's) portion is his people. Jacob his allotted heritage.

So here is a poetic passage suggesting that Israel (Jacob) belongs to Yahweh, but the other peoples belong to the sons of God. But you will notice a curious footnote in the RSV. The standard Hebrew text which was passed down through the official rabbinical line actually reads, "he fixed the bounds of the peoples according to the sons of *Israel*," a reading that makes very little sense and seems rather puzzling. The Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament), however, had

rendered this passage as “angels of God,” instead of “sons of Israel,” leading a number of scholars to surmise that in the original Hebrew, the phrase “sons of God (*Elohim*)” had appeared. Apparently the devout and monotheistic scribes could not accept such an interpretation, so they modified the text to read “sons of Israel.” But when the Dead Sea Scrolls came to light., one of the more sensational discoveries was a portion of a Hebrew manuscript with this passage included. In short, the conjecture of the scholars who had looked at the Greek Old Testament was correct; the manuscript read “sons of God.” So the rendering given above by the RSV is most certainly correct and is one of the most helpful passages for establishing the Old Testament concept of the heavenly court.

Moving into narrative portions of the Old Testament, additional passages confirm the view that Israel sometimes saw Yahweh as one of the *Elohim* instead of the supreme and only *Elohim*. Judges 11:24 indicates that Jephthah, one of the judges, held such a view; at least such is indicated by his diplomatic correspondence with the Ammonites “Will you not possess what Chemosh your *Elohim* gives you to possess? And all that *Yahweh* our *Elohim* has dispossessed before us, we will possess.”

This view is indicated also in the story of David. When he was fleeing from Saul, he had opportunity to kill the king, but settled for his spear and jar of water. When Saul realized what had happened, he and David carried on a moving conversation – across the valley from each other – but moving nevertheless. In his appeal to Saul, David makes the following pathetic observation:

If it is *Yahweh* who has stirred you up against me, may he accept an offering; but if it is men, may they be cursed before *Yahweh*, for they have driven me out this day that I should have no share in the heritage of *Yahweh*, saying, “Go, serve other *Elohim*” (1 Sam. 26.19).

Driving David out of the land of Israel was tantamount to saying: “Go serve other *Elohim*. You are no longer in *Yahweh*’s land.”

Further hints of this view of the heavenly court appear in a most curious story in 2 Kings 3. The story describes Israel’s attack against Moab. Moab was on the run as Israel pursued them right into Moab itself. In fact, circumstances had become so bleak for the Moabites that their king felt constrained to do something drastic: sacrifice the crown prince, his eldest son. When Israel saw this sacrifice taking place, they apparently recognized that here was *the* supreme sacrifice that a king could make to Chemosh. But note the strange way that the biblical writer has recorded the story for us:

Then he took his eldest son who was to reign in his stead, and offered him for a burnt offering upon the wall. And there came great wrath on Israel and they withdrew up from him and returned to their own land (2 Kings 3:27).

The biblical writer is apparently afraid to admit that Israel had granted any kind of power to Chemosh, yet he does tell us that the army hastened back to their own land. When we put this story alongside the other passages in the Old Testament which touch on the *Elohim*, the conclusion becomes clear that Israel’s army was not at all sure that *Yahweh* was with them on

foreign soil. Yahweh was *Elohim* in Israel, but was he also *Elohim* in Moab? They weren't taking any chances and headed for home.

Another story which has a bearing on the discussion is that of Naaman in 2 Kings 5. Naaman apparently felt that it was necessary to travel to Israel if he was to be healed by Israel's God. His testimony after his healing is remarkable, both with respect to the claims that he makes for Yahweh and for the parallel but somewhat contradictory recognition that back home in Syria Yahweh was not really in charge:

“Behold I know that there is no *Elohim* in all the earth but in Israel; so accept now a present from your servant.” But he said, “As *Yahweh* lives, whom I serve, I will receive none.” And he urged him to take it, but he refused. Then Naaman said, “If not, I pray you, let there be given to your servant two mules’ burden of earth; for henceforth your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any *Elohim* but *Yahweh*. In this matter may *Yahweh* pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, *Yahweh* pardon your servant in this matter.’ He said to him, “Go in peace” (2 Kings 5:15-19).

Yahweh is the only true *Elohim*, but he is still the *Elohim* of Israel. Hence, some of Israel’s land must be taken to Syria so that Naaman can worship Israel’s *Elohim* properly, on Israel’s land.

Still further evidence for the heavenly court comes from the book of Daniel. Daniel 10 describes how Daniel prayed for divine assistance. The angelic response was delayed because ‘the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, so I left him there with the prince of the kingdom of Persia’ (Daniel 10:13). Daniel 10:20-21 also mentions the “prince of Persia,” who will be followed by the “prince of Greece.” Furthermore, Michael “your prince contends by my side against these.” Now without the other evidence for the concept of the heavenly court in the Old Testament, one might be tempted to see these princes as mere human rulers. Yet the figure of Michael seems to suggest that we are, in fact, dealing with the supernatural. If that is the case, then the book of Daniel also reflects the concept of the heavenly court: Michael and Gabriel on Daniel’s side against the Prince of Persia and the Prince of Greece. The tensions are deeper here, approaching the full break as seen in New Testament times, but the interesting thing from the standpoint of the heavenly court is the fact that each nation has its prince.

The crowning piece of evidence for the concept of the heavenly court is provided by Psalm 82. Without the concept of the heavenly court, the psalm is quite inexplicable, but when set against the background of the heavenly court it can be seen as a significant step towards the position which is so important to Christians, namely, that there is really only one *Elohim* worthy of the name, and that is Yahweh, the God of Israel.

This psalm is one of the best places to see the dual usage of *Elohim* as singular and as plural, for the psalm begins: “God (*Elohim*) has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods (*Elohim*) he holds judgment” (Ps. 82:1). God then proceeds to condemn roundly these *Elohim* for failing to establish justice. They have judged unjustly, showing partiality to the

wicked and failing to give justice to the weak, the fatherless, the afflicted and destitute. Then in a glorious climax which prepared the way for the exaltation of the one true God, the psalmist quotes his God: “I say, You, are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you; nevertheless you shall die like men, and fall like any prince”(Ps. 82:6-7).

So the reluctant members, the unjust members, the “satans” in the heavenly court, are finally brought to justice for their failures. What then is the only conclusion that can be drawn? In the words of the psalmist: “Arise, O God, judge the earth; for to thee belong all the nations!” (Ps. 82:8).

No longer will Naaman have to haul his mule loads of Israelite soil to worship the one true God. Cast down are Chemosh, Dagon, and Rimmon. Vanquished are the princes of Persia and Greece, for there is one God to whom all the nations belong, the God of Israel. That, of course, is a sentiment with which Christians would most heartily agree. Although the demonic is present in the world, there is one God who is over all, above all, and the creator of all that is.

Why did it take so long for Israel to see the truth? And why did God not make it clear all along? The answer lies in the character of our God. A freedom-loving God must grant his creatures the right to rebel. Furthermore, he must allow the principle of selfishness to manifest itself clearly if righteousness is ever to gain the upper hand. As God led Israel along the path of restoration, he sought to win the hearts and minds of his people. In a world permeated with polytheism, convincing Israel that there is one true God in heaven who is God over all was no easy task and the route may seem to us to have been circuitous. But as Israel grew towards the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the principles of the great cosmic struggle began to emerge more clearly, until finally in the New Testament the issues and the key protagonists stood out in bold relief for all to see.

Nor should we overlook the significance of that New Testament climax as it is so vividly described in Revelation 12. The war in heaven and the thrusting out of the dragon is often seen only in its primeval significance, but the book of Revelation clearly sees the struggle climaxing at the cross. As the Devil is cast down to the earth a loud voice in heaven proclaims:

Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death (Rev. 12:10-11).

The cosmic struggle may have been of long standing, but regardless of when the war in heaven began, it was won at the cross. Though the skirmishes on earth must continue (cf. Rev. 12:12), the heavenly court has been purified and is now composed solely of Michael and his angels. The banished accuser is no longer one of the “sons of God.” Thus, in a sense, Revelation 12 marks the transition between the Old Testament concept of the heavenly court and the New Testament portrayal of the battle between Christ and Satan, the great struggle for the hearts and lives of me – for the rulership of this world and the universe.

Theme: Defeat of the Assyrians

Leading Question: What happens when a pagan king uses the name of the Lord in vain?

This week's lesson focuses Isaiah 36-39, an historical interlude between two largely prophetic sections. As noted in lesson #1, one could describe the two prophetic sections as "Israel under the Assyrians" (Isaiah 1-35) and "Israel under the Babylonians" (Isaiah 40-66).

But the historical interlude includes a cluster of remarkable experiences in the life of God's people that we should address. Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, was at Lachish, some 30 miles SW of Jerusalem, where the archaeologists have unearthed a pit that held some 1500 casualties. He has sent his representative, the Rabshakah, to Jerusalem to argue with Hezekiah that he and his people should surrender to the Assyrians. The northern kingdom of Israel has already succumbed to the Assyrians who have threatened all people everywhere with death or forced relocation.

By the time the story is over, however, the hand of the Lord has inflicted a massive attack on Sennacherib's army. According to Scripture, the angel of the Lord struck down 185,000 Assyrian soldiers, and Sennacherib was forced to return home without conquering Jerusalem. But as the story opens, Hezekiah was in deep trouble. Everything around had fallen apart; he and his people were isolated.

The Rabshakeh was a skilled tactician, and he knew enough about the Judean situation that he could claim that Yahweh, the God of the Judeans had sent him to take the city.

Question: What happens when a pagan king takes the name of the Lord in vain?

Comment: One helpful insight that sheds light on the Old Testament accounts is the way the biblical writers have used a circumlocution to refer to Yahweh, Israel's God. "Yahweh" is a personal name for Israel's God. "Elohim" is the generic term for God that can actually be written as God, god, or gods. Anyone's "god" could be described by the label "Elohim." But Yahweh was specific to Israel's God.

After Israel went into captivity, they finally realized that they had been taken captive because of their disobedience to Yahweh's law. So to make sure that they did not break the laws the "built a fence about the law." One way they did this was to add regulations. When Jesus' disciples went through a grain field and plucked some kernels on Sabbath, for example, they broke no less than four of 39 additional laws: harvesting, threshing, winnowing, and preparing food.

The way they built a fence around the third command ("You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain") was simply to stop using the name Yahweh at all! That habit is so deeply ingrained that the vast majority of modern translations continue to use a circumlocution. In some Hebrew text, the scribes left the consonants of YHWH without vowel points, indicating to the reader that they were to use an alternate name. In "pointed" texts they used the consonants

of Yahweh with the vowels of “Adonai,” usually translated as lord, but could be used with any authority figure.

Modern translations, however, indicate this circumlocution by using all upper case letters when the text has YHWH. Thus in the Rabshakeh’s speech all those references to “LORD” in all capitals indicate that he was using the name of Israel’s God.

Question: Does the Old Testament God punish pagans for misusing his name?

Another intriguing feature of the biblical accounts of Sennacherib’s attack is the nuanced description of Hezekiah’s faith: stronger in 2 Chronicles 32, weaker in 2 Kings 18-19 and in Isaiah 37. The Chronicler has Isaiah and Hezekiah praying together over the Rabshakeh’s letter (2 Chron. 32.20), whereas both Kings and Isaiah have Hezekiah appealing to Isaiah to pray to “Yahweh, *your* God” (2 Kings 19:4; Isaiah 37:4).

Kings and Isaiah also reflect this more negative stance toward Hezekiah in their comments about him after the incident with the Babylonian visitors when Hezekiah showed them all the royal treasures. Hezekiah’s response to the prophetic judgment in Isaiah 39:8 is flippant; in 2 Kings 20:39 even more so.

*“Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, ‘The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good.’ For he thought, ‘There will be peace and security in my days’” (Isa. 39:8).

*“Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, ‘The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good.’ For he thought, ‘Why not, if there will be peace and security in my days?’” (2 Kings 20:19).

Question: On what basis are inspired writers enabled to give differing perspectives?

To the modern mind, the extra-ordinary number of dead (185,000) is a stumbling block, and even to argue for an angelic agent can be a problem.

But there are really two issues here: 1) the high number; 2) the angelic intervention. The first issue is not one that we will address at length here. It is worth noting, however, that the mass grave in Lachish yielded 1500 fatalities, a more reasonable number. For further reading on the problem of the large numbers in the Old Testament, see “Numbers, Genealogies, Dates: Amram’s Brothers Were Really Prolific,” in Alden Thompson, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1991; 2nd edition, Gonzalez, FL: Energion Publications, 2016).

The second issue is the involvement of the supernatural. And here a quotation from C. S. Lewis is to the point: “When the Old Testament says that Sennacherib’s invasion was stopped by angels (2 Kings 19:35), and Herodotus says it was stopped by a lot of mice who came and ate up all the bowstrings of his army, an open-minded man will be on the side of the angels. Unless you start by begging the question, there is nothing intrinsically unlikely in the existence of angels or in the action ascribed to them. But mice just don’t do these things.” C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 27-28.

Question: Is it simply the spirit of our age that leads to the denial of the supernatural? What can believers do to counteract that impulse?

Theme: Comfort My People

Leading Question: How much of Isaiah 40 requires a “correct” historical context in order to bring meaning to the believer’s life?

This chapter from Isaiah 40 seems to beg for a different kind of approach. As I worked through it, I couldn’t help thinking of that “unofficial anthem of the American west,” “Home, Home on the Range.” The last two lines of the first stanza really seem to resonate:

“Where seldom is heard a discouraging word
And the skies are not cloudy all day.”

Yet given the positive features Isaiah 40, some shadows remain, for wherever there is forgiveness and restoration, there are also potentially painful memories of previous shortcomings. But what is so noteworthy about this chapter are the themes that are absent: No bashing of one’s enemies and no condemnation of sin. Still, at the head of each segment, I will highlight key concepts and italicize key phrases. These can be evaluated and discussed, and place on a continuum between “helpful” and “troubling.”

Gratitude for restoration, memory of sins forgiven: How helpful? How troubling?

40:1 Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord’s hand
double for all her sins.

Memory of a New Testament application: John the Baptist: How helpful? How troubling?

3 A voice cries out:
“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
4 Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Transitory humanity, enduring Word of God: How helpful? How troubling?

6 A voice says, "Cry out!"

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

All people are grass,

their constancy is like the flower of the field.

7 *The grass withers, the flower fades,*

when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;

surely the people are grass.

8 *The grass withers, the flower fades;*

but the word of our God will stand forever.

Powerful God, gentle shepherd: How helpful? How troubling?

9 Get you up to a high mountain,

O Zion, herald of good tidings;

lift up your voice with strength,

O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,

lift it up, do not fear;

say to the cities of Judah,

"Here is your God!"

10 *See, the Lord God comes with might,*

and his arm rules for him;

his reward is with him,

and his recompense before him.

11 *He will feed his flock like a shepherd;*

he will gather the lambs in his arms,

and carry them in his bosom,

and gently lead the mother sheep.

God is everything, humanity is nothing: How helpful? How troubling?

12 Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand

and marked off the heavens with a span,

enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure,

and weighed the mountains in scales

and the hills in a balance?

13 Who has directed the spirit of the Lord,

or as his counselor has instructed him?

14 Whom did he consult for his enlightenment,

and who taught him the path of justice?

Who taught him knowledge,

and showed him the way of understanding?

15 *Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket,*

and are accounted as dust on the scales;

see, he takes up the isles like fine dust.

16 Lebanon would not provide fuel enough,

nor are its animals enough for a burnt offering.
17 *All the nations are as nothing before him;
they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.*

Idols are as nothing – perhaps the only jarring note in the chapter, though quite true.

18 To whom then will you liken God,
or what likeness compare with him?
19 An idol? —A workman casts it,
and a goldsmith overlays it with gold,
and casts for it silver chains.
20 As a gift one chooses mulberry wood
—wood that will not rot—
then seeks out a skilled artisan
to set up an image that will not topple.

All-powerful God, transitory creation. How helpful? How troubling?

21 Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
22 It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in;
23 who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.
24 *Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows upon them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.*
25 To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.
26 Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who created these?
He who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing.

Restorative power, enduring strength. How helpful? How troubling?

27 Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
“My way is hidden from the Lord,
and my right is disregarded by my God”?

28 Have you not known? Have you not heard?
*The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.*

29 *He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.*

30 *Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;*

31 *but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.*

Question: Some critics have argued that because Isaiah is focusing on a future rule of Babylon, that the book was probably not written by Isaiah, son of Amoz. Is it possible (and safe!) simply to shrug at such matters?

Note: See the note at the end of Lesson #1. One paragraph is repeated here as a reminder of the broad time covered by the book of Isaiah:

The Superscription, 1:1 [pp. 568-569]

“The opening phrase of the Book of Isaiah, *the vision of Isaiah*, suggests that the entire book is written as a VISION. The whole work is clearly related to a man named *Isaiah*, who is identified as a *son of Amoz*, but it need not be narrowly considered as a designation of the author. The issue of authorship involves a number of problems, especially the evidence that the book describes things that happen over [568/569] a span of centuries. No one person could have recounted all of them.”

Theme: To Serve and to Save

Leading Question: The “servant” of the Lord is sometimes presented as a corporate entity, sometimes as an individual – how does one tell the difference?

A recurring theme in Isaiah 40-48 is the worthlessness of idols and false religion. In these chapters, at least eight passages reflect something close to mockery toward idols and those who worship them: 40:18-20; 41:6-7, 21-24; 44:9-20; 45:16; 46:5-7; 47:10-15; 48:5. A vivid excerpt from a long diatribe (44:18-20) illustrates the prophet’s disdain for idols and those who worship them:

Isaiah 44:18 They do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand. 19 No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, “Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted meat and have eaten. Now shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?” 20 He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, “Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?”

Question: How does this mockery relate to that other, less-well-known thread in the Old Testament that testifies to a belief in national deities and the existence of the heavenly court in which real, live supernatural beings play a key role in human thinking?

Comment: The ideas of the national deity and the heavenly court are discussed more fully in the chapter from *Who’s Afraid of the Old Testament God?* attached at the end of Lesson #6, “Whatever Happened to Satan in the Old Testament?” Perhaps the best illustration the idea of the national deity is the story of Naaman (2 Kings 5). One of the best illustrations of the “heavenly court” at work is found in the Prologue to the book of Job (1:6-12; 2:1-6). The vivid mockery of the idols is very memorable, and probably makes it more difficult for modern readers to recognize a cosmology which includes another whole realm of supernatural beings who are not silly pieces of wood as mocked by the prophet.

Question: How much can believers today share in vision of Isaiah’s “servant”?

Comment: The references to the “servant” in Isaiah 41:8-9 point to both comfort and outreach. Note how God extends comfort and promises strength to an Israel which is described as “a worm” and an “insect”:

Isaiah 41: 8 But you, Israel, my servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen,
the offspring of Abraham, my friend;
9 you whom I took from the ends of the earth,

and called from its farthest corners,
 saying to you, "You are my servant,
 I have chosen you and not cast you off";
 10 do not fear, for I am with you,
 do not be afraid, for I am your God;
 I will strengthen you, I will help you,
 I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.
 11 Yes, all who are incensed against you
 shall be ashamed and disgraced;
 those who strive against you
 shall be as nothing and shall perish.
 12 You shall seek those who contend with you,
 but you shall not find them;
 those who war against you
 shall be as nothing at all.
 13 For I, the Lord your God,
 hold your right hand;
 it is I who say to you, "Do not fear,
 I will help you."
 14 *Do not fear, you worm Jacob,
 you insect Israel!*
 I will help you, says the Lord;
 your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.
 15 Now, I will make of you a threshing sledge,
 sharp, new, and having teeth;
 you shall thresh the mountains and crush them,
 and you shall make the hills like chaff.
 16 You shall winnow them and the wind shall carry them away,
 and the tempest shall scatter them.
 Then you shall rejoice in the Lord;
 in the Holy One of Israel you shall glory.
 17 *When the poor and needy seek water,
 and there is none,
 and their tongue is parched with thirst,
 I the Lord will answer them,
 I the God of Israel will not forsake them.*
 18 *I will open rivers on the bare heights,
 and fountains in the midst of the valleys;
 I will make the wilderness a pool of water,
 and the dry land springs of water.*
 19 *I will put in the wilderness the cedar,
 the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive;
 I will set in the desert the cypress,
 the plane and the pine together,*

*20 so that all may see and know,
all may consider and understand,
that the hand of the Lord has done this,
the Holy One of Israel has created it.*

Question: What is the task given to the “servant” of Isaiah 42:1-4? Note the application of this passage to Jesus in Matthew 12:15-21, recorded by Matthew after Jesus’ healing miracle of the man with a withered hand and the plan of the Jewish leaders to take his life. Here is the quote from Isaiah followed by the one from Matthew:

Isaiah 42:1 Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
2 He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
3 a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
4 He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

Matthew 12:15 When Jesus became aware of this, he departed. Many crowds followed him, and he cured all of them, 16 and he ordered them not to make him known. 17 This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah:
18 “Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
19 He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.
20 He will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smoldering wick
until he brings justice to victory.
21 And in his name the Gentiles will hope.”

The Persian “Messiah”

Question: Isaiah 44-46 is rich with allusions and applications. Cyrus, for example, is referred to as the Persian “Messiah,” with the word “Messiah” placed in quotes. Why?

Comment: The Hebrew word *mashiach* is usually translated into English as “anointed one.” But when transliterated it suggests a more specific application to Jesus Christ.

In this connection, several points need to be considered: First, the word can refer to anyone who has been anointed, including priests and kings. Second, in the course of time, it would come to be applied exclusively to Jesus. Indeed, “Christ” is simply the transliterated version of the Greek translation for anointed one, *christos*. “Messiah” is simply the English transliteration of the Greek word for Messiah, *messias*. One way to discover how jarring this “reality” can be is simply to insert the English word “christ” in the narrative where David refused to take David’s life:

1Sam. 24:10: “This very day your eyes have seen how the Lord gave you into my hand in the cave; and some urged me to kill you, but I spared you. I said, ‘I will not raise my hand against my lord; for he is the Lord’s *christ* (= anointed).’

The king was the “anointed” one, the very human “Lord’s anointed.” But after Jesus’ resurrection, the word was capitalized, so to speak and there was only one Jesus Christ. That the Messiah was God was a very foreign idea to the people of Jesus’ day and to think that the Messiah must die and be resurrected was also a very difficult idea to grasp. But that is the way the Lord decided to do it. And in the setting of Isaiah, Cyrus was God’s “anointed.”

The Predictions Concerning Cyrus: Isa. 44:2 and 45:1

The two references in Cyrus present a tantalizing challenge. These ideas are worth noting.

1. In Isaiah’s day, Cyrus name would have meant nothing. He hadn’t even been born yet.
2. Modern Christians have pointed to these references as proof that God can foretell the future. That is understandable since modern secularists pour scorn on the idea of a personal God who foretells the future.

3. Isaiah’s polemic against idols stresses the point that the true God knows the future, idols don’t. Note these vivid lines from Isaiah 46:8-11:

Isaiah 46:8-11: Remember this and consider,
recall it to mind, you transgressors,
9 remember the former things of old;
for I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is no one like me,
10 declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying, “My purpose shall stand,
and I will fulfill my intention,”
11 calling a bird of prey from the east,
the man for my purpose from a far country.
I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass;
I have planned, and I will do it.

4. The idea of human freedom and possibility that humans can make a difference in human history, or put more bluntly, that humans can torpedo God’s plans, must also be taken into

account. In particular the story of Jonah tells how the response of the people nullified the prediction of Ninevah's destruction. In other words, the prophecy was successful, but the prediction failed.

5. The awareness that the book of Isaiah covered some 300 years of Israel's history meant that more than one person had to be involved. Many scholars have referred to the mention of Isaiah's disciples in 8:16 as part of a possible solution: "Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples." Clearly the book was written by those who were deeply loyal to the ministry of the man whose name has become attached to the book.

In addition to those issues directly related to Isaiah, some other intriguing examples from Scripture show the fragility of "predictions" made in the name of Yahweh. Below are four examples, including an astonishing one from Isaiah. In addition, at the end of this lesson an article addressing the issue of conditionality is included: "Who Can Change the Mind of God?" *Signs of the Times*, February 1992, 25-27.

A. The Prediction of the Conversion of the Assyrians and the Egyptians. Right in the middle of strident judgments against the nations, including judgments against Assyria (14:24-27) and Egypt (19:1-17), the book of Isaiah drops a glorious bombshell, announcing that Israel would join her two ancient enemies, the Assyrians and the Egyptians, as united comrades under Yahweh's banner:

Isaiah 19:23-25 On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.

24 On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, 25 whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage."

This appears to be a straightforward prediction that remains unfulfilled to this day.

B. Prediction of Saul's attack on David. When David was fleeing from Saul, he ended up in the town of Keilah. Saul heard that he was there and went after him. The events that follow are recorded in 1 Sam. 23:9-13:

1 Sam. 23:9 When David learned that Saul was plotting evil against him, he said to the priest Abiathar, "Bring the ephod here." 10 David said, "O Lord, the God of Israel, your servant has heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah, to destroy the city on my account. 11 And now, will Saul come down as your servant has heard? O Lord, the God of Israel, I beseech you, tell your servant." The Lord said, "He will come down." 12 Then David said, "Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?" The Lord said, "They will surrender you." 13 Then David and his men, who were about six hundred, set out and left Keilah; they wandered wherever they could go. When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the expedition.

In short, when the circumstances changed, the prediction needed modification. Could we

suggest that a prediction is like a battery-powered flashlight? When the batteries are fresh, the light works best.

C. Predictions of Jehoiakim's death. Even when a prophet's prediction comes true in broad outline, the biblical accounts vary considerably in recording the outcome. Through Jeremiah, for example, the Lord predicted concerning King Jehoiakim: "He shall have no one to sit upon the throne of David, and his dead body shall be cast out to the heat by day and the frost by night" (Jer. 36:30). Neither Kings nor Chronicles confirm that prediction precisely. The author of Kings says that Jehoiakim slept with his fathers (2 Kings 24:6); the Chronicler says that Nebuchadnezzar "bound him with fetters to take him to Babylon" (2 Chron. 36:6). And both sources say that his son Jehoiachin reigned in his stead (2 Kings 24:6; 2 Chron. 36:6). Did Jehoiakim suffer his predicted fate? Perhaps in the general sense of a doomed reign. But the biblical accounts do not confirm the precise details of the prediction.

D. Babylon's Desolation of Tyre. Ezekiel 26 describes Babylon's desecration of Tyre. Here are some key lines:

Ezekiel 26:14-15, 21: "I will make you a bare rock;
you shall be a place for spreading nets.
You shall never again be rebuilt,
for I the Lord have spoken,
says the Lord God.

21 I will bring you to a dreadful end, and you shall be no more; though sought for, you will never be found again, says the Lord God.

But in Ezekiel 29:17-20, the same prophet reports that because Babylon hadn't gotten anything from Tyre, Yahweh was giving Egypt to Babylon instead as a kind of consolation prize:

Ezek. 29:17-20: In the twenty-seventh year, in the first month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came to me: 18 Mortal, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon made his army labor hard against Tyre; every head was made bald and every shoulder was rubbed bare; yet neither he nor his army got anything from Tyre to pay for the labor that he had expended against it. 19 Therefore thus says the Lord God: I will give the land of Egypt to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon; and he shall carry off its wealth and despoil it and plunder it; and it shall be the wages for his army. 20 I have given him the land of Egypt as his payment for which he labored, because they worked for me, says the Lord God.

Another cluster of passages could be inserted here. The general heading could be "The God who repents." Moses (gratefully, Exod. 32:11-14) and Jonah (angrily, Jonah 3:10 – 4:1) could tell us about the God who repents – the NRSV usually translates these passages as the God who "changes his mind." But these three passages are more specific to individuals, and would further illustrate the suggestion of a battery-powered flashlight as noted above.

1.Ahab. This first example is an amazing one for it reflects God's grace to Ahab, one of the most wicked kings of Israel, according to Scripture: "Indeed, there was no one like Ahab, who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord, urged on by his wife Jezebel" (1

Kings 21:25).

Ahab had arranged for the murder of innocent Naboth at Jezebel's instigation. Elijah delivered this stinging judgment:

1 Kings 21:21-24: I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel; 22 and I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha son of Ahijah, because you have provoked me to anger and have caused Israel to sin. 23 Also concerning Jezebel the Lord said, 'The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the bounds of Jezreel.' 24 Anyone belonging to Ahab who dies in the city the dogs shall eat; and anyone of his who dies in the open country the birds of the air shall eat."

Totally out of character, Ahab took the message to heart and repented with sackcloth. Yahweh noticed and spoke to Elijah:

1 Kings 21:28-29: Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: 29 "Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son's days I will bring the disaster on his house."

If his son had repented in the same spirit, could the judgment have been postponed further? Scripture doesn't say.

2. Hezekiah. On contrast with the other two examples, the extra time given to Hezekiah was not linked to good behavior. The divine decree was communicated through Isaiah:

Isaiah 38:1 In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz came to him, and said to him, "Thus says the Lord: Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover."

Scripture says that Hezekiah "wept bitterly" and the Lord responded:

Isaiah 38:5-6: "Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the Lord, the God of your ancestor David: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life. 6 I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and defend this city."

In short, God had spoken and then changed his mind in response to a human plea.

3. Josiah. Towards the end of the Kingdom of Judah, the good king Josiah initiated some significant reforms. When Josiah came to the throne, Hezekiah's reforms and great passover (see 2 Chron. 30-31) were in the past. Indeed, the king's father (Amon) and Grandfather (Manasseh) were among the worst of the kings of Judah. But 2 Chron. 32:1-20 tells the gradual process by which Josiah awoke spiritually: At age 8 he began to seek the God of David; at age 12, he began to destroy the pagan altars and other symbols of paganism in Judah and Jerusalem; at age 18 he began to clean out the temple and that's when they discovered the law in the midst of the rubble, probably a copy of Deuteronomy with its lists of blessings and curses. Josiah was horrified to

hear the destiny of the country. So he sought counsel of Huldah the prophetess, who lived in the city. She affirmed that the city was doomed, but she also said about Josiah:

2 Chron. 34:26-28. 26 “But as to the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the Lord, thus shall you say to him: Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Regarding the words that you have heard, 27 because your heart was penitent and you humbled yourself before God when you heard his words against this place and its inhabitants, and you have humbled yourself before me, and have torn your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, says the Lord. 28 I will gather you to your ancestors and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace; your eyes shall not see all the disaster that I will bring on this place and its inhabitants.”

If Josiah’s descendants had been as serious about their faith as Josiah himself had been, could a further postponement been possible? Scripture doesn’t say. But on the basis of these passages, we can clearly conclude that God’s predictions are not locked in place. Humans can make a difference.

From an Adventist perspective, the lasting impact of the 1844 Disappointment, led Ellen White to make this striking statement about conditionalism:

“The angels of God in their messages to men represent time as very short. Thus it has always been presented to me. It is true that time has continued longer than we expected in the early days of this message. Our Saviour did not appear as soon as we hoped. But has the word of the Lord failed? Never! It should be remembered that the promises and threatenings of God are alike conditional”
Selected Messages, Book 1, 67 (Ms 4 1883).

Question: Is the servant of Isaiah 49:1-12 a reference to a person or the nation or both? How does this chapter relate to the work of the Messiah and the work of the church?

“Who Can Change the Mind of God?”

By Alden Thompson

Signs of the Times, Feb. 1992, 25-27

God is in the business of changing people's minds, especially the minds of sinners. That's not surprising. But it is worth a raised eyebrow or two to hear God ask sinners to help *Him* change His *own* mind.

You heard right. God asks sinners to help Him change His mind. Jeremiah 26 tells the story, shedding important light on the purpose of God's prophetic messages in the Old Testament.

In the chapter, the spotlight is on Jeremiah himself, a prophet in misery, prophesying in a miserable time. The Lord has sent him a bad news/good news message to pass on to the people of Judah. The bad news is God's threat to destroy the temple and the city of Jerusalem. The good news shines through in the word *IF*: *IF* the message is blunt enough, suggests God, maybe “they will listen, all of them, and will turn from their evil way, that I may change my mind about the disaster that I intend to bring on them because of their evil ways” (Jer. 26:13 NRSV). It's an earlier version of Peter's “patient” God who wants everyone to repent and no one to burn (2 Pet. 3:9).

In this instance, Jeremiah lays down a definite *IF*, an approach well-attested in Scripture. Moses' last speech to Israel is perhaps the most notable example: Blessings *IF* you obey (Deut. 28:1-14), curses *IF* you don't (Deut. 28:15-68).

Jeremiah 26 tells us more about God's use of the *IF* clause. But before we take a closer look, we should note that God does not limit himself to this one approach. In many instances He seems to drop all conditions, speaking of both doom and salvation *as if* they were iron-clad and sealed, no ifs, ands, or buts.

Prophecies of doom in this mode are easy to spot in the prophets. Micah, for example, on Jerusalem: “It's all over. Zion will be a plowed field, Jerusalem a heap of ruins” (Mic. 3:12). Or Jonah to Ninevah: “In forty days Ninevah will be destroyed” (Jonah 3:4).

On the positive side, unconditional promises of salvation are also ready to hand. God takes the initiative. Jeremiah's new covenant promise is a good example: “*I* will write my law on your heart. Your life depends on *my* certain promises, not your broken ones” (Jeremiah 31:31-34). The same is true of Ezekiel's promise of a new heart: “*I* will give you a new heart. And *my* Spirit will make you keep my laws” (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

Since promises and threats appear in both modes in Scripture, that is, with the *IF* and without, it is interesting to note how Christians bring the two patterns together – or keep them apart.

Mostly they have kept them apart. Those who stress Divine sovereignty (e.g. the Presbyterian and Reformed [Calvinist] tradition) focus on the unconditional promises and threats, minimizing the human response. But those who stress the importance of the human will (e.g. the Methodist [Arminian] tradition) have less to say about Divine sovereignty, focusing instead on the *IF* clauses.

Pushed to their logical extremes, the two approaches seem contradictory, at least at the theoretical level. One world is determined by God's decision, the other by human effort. If, however, we look at both approaches for their practical, motivational value, they complement each other, covering the full range of human needs, for as perceptive parents, teachers, and

pastors know all too well, what turns one person on, turns another off, and vice versa.

Some crave freedom, others security. Some love a challenge, responding best when they have a hand on the reins. Others are most productive when assured that their destiny lies secure in God's hands.

In our modern world, it is the difference between those who thrive on the uncertain excitement of working on commission and those who need a steady salary: the hard-driving salesman in the showroom, and the faithful accountant in the back room. In a religious setting, it is the difference between the fast-paced world of the evangelist and the more settled parish environment of the pastor.

Remarkably, because of sin, either approach can result in discouragement or carelessness. Those who love a challenge too easily slip into neutral in a secure world. Those needing security become just as ineffective in the face of a challenge.

So God does what every wise parent, teacher, and pastor has to do: He mixes, matches and blends His methods, becoming all things to all people in order to save some.

But now let's return to Jeremiah 26 and look more closely at God's attempt to motivate His people. When Jeremiah first pled with them to change God's mind by changing their behavior, they treated Jeremiah as a traitor. Jeremiah 7 records his attack on their secure world. You can't just say: "The Temple! The Temple! The Temple!" as though it were some magic charm, he warned. You can't kill, steal, and commit adultery while claiming the temple as security. Reform, says God, or I will destroy this temple as I did the one at Shiloh (Jer. 7:1-15).

Jeremiah 26 records the people's reaction. "Treason," they cried. "You shall die!" (Jer. 26:8-9). They liked their safe, secure world, one unthreatened by wicked behavior. Amazingly, they viewed Jeremiah's *conditional* threat as a treasonous certainty, even though he plainly said God was begging them to change His mind (Jer. 26:3). "If you repent," Jeremiah promised again, "God *will* change His mind" (Jer. 26:13).

Suddenly, someone remembered a piece of history, just enough to rescue Jeremiah from the mob. "Wait!" came the cry. "In the days of King Hezekiah [some 100 years earlier] didn't the prophet Micah prophesy that Jerusalem would become a heap of ruins? Yet King Hezekiah didn't put Micah to death. Instead, he turned to the Lord and the Lord changed His mind" (Jer. 26:17-19). Jeremiah 26:18 includes the actual quote from Micah 3:12, a threat of destruction, unconditional and unequivocal. Yet Micah's audience heard the unspoken IF and repented. And the Lord changed his mind.

The same thing happened when Jonah preached against Ninevah. Although he announced unconditional destruction, the people heard God's IF, repented, and saved their city. The NRSV simply says: "God changed his mind" (Jonah 3:10). Jonah, however, was angry. He wanted smoke, even though, as he himself admitted, he knew all along that God would relent if the people did (Jonah 4:1-2).

In the end, a remarkable two-fold conclusion emerges from the prophets: 1. When people are sensitive to the Spirit of God, they hear His IF, even when it is not stated. 2. When they resist, they don't hear the IF even though it is shouted in their ears. Isn't it curious, that those hearing Micah and Jonah responded positively to the unconditional threat, while Jeremiah's listeners resisted the IF? Only when they remembered Micah's unconditional threat did they finally hear the IF and respond.

It seems safe to conclude, then, that as far as God's threats are concerned, all are

conditional, even when no IF is included. But what about promises of salvation and restoration? That's a more volatile question, for while all evangelical Christians agree that restoration is certain, the when and how is much debated.

A sizeable number of modern Christians have adopted so-called "dispensationalism," a perspective emphasizing God's sovereignty to the virtual exclusion of conditionality: God's prophecies will be fulfilled, period. Consistent with that position, every unfulfilled prophecy from the Old Testament is expected to be fulfilled *in detail* at the end of time or during the millennium to follow. Even human death and animal sacrifices are said to continue after the second coming of Christ.

If we take the position, however, that the purpose of prophecy is to reform not simply to inform, then we can see every prophetic "restoration" picture as establishing the principle of restoration. The details will differ according the differing needs of each audience. The great restoration pictures of Scripture, Ezekiel 40-48, Isaiah 65-66, Zechariah 14, Revelation 21-22, all confirm the hope of restoration, yet the details differ, sometimes dramatically. Recognizing the principle of conditionality explains why some were not fulfilled in the Old Testament. Yet we don't have to toss them out as contradictory or struggle to integrate every detail into one grand master plan. They simply are God's way of being all things to all people that He might save some. Saving is always God's consistent purpose. That never changes, even when threats of doom seem to overwhelm the promise of restoration.

Finally, I must admit, that Jeremiah 26 has helped me see the glimmer of hope even in the most emphatic pronouncement of doom, for when Jeremiah says that "the Lord will change his mind about the disaster that he has pronounced against you" (Jer. 26:13 NRSV), he picks loose a thread of hope that apparently was bound fast when King Josiah, just a few years before, discovered the law book in the temple and learned to his horror that the nation was doomed. As told in 2 Kings 22, the prophetess Huldah informed Josiah that Judah's sin was too great. Disaster was certain. But the Lord would postpone destruction until after Josiah's reign because the king had humbled himself before the Lord (2 Kings 22:15-20).

Could the evil day have been postponed permanently by continued repentance? I think so, for Jeremiah promised the people: "The Lord will change His mind." If rattling the saber will wake the people up, the Lord will do it. "Change my mind," He says. "I want to save, not destroy."

Theme: Doing the Unthinkable

Leading Question: “About whom does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?”

If you know your New Testament you may recognize the leading question as coming from the Ethiopian eunuch in his encounter with Philip on the road to Gaza (Acts 8:23-26). Our lessons are based on the prophet Isaiah, but this week’s lesson takes us to the heart of Jesus’ mission as understood in the New Testament.

Question: Why is the eunuch’s question so significant, both in the setting of the New Testament and in today’s scholarly discussions of the suffering servant song in Isaiah 53?

Comment: The identity of the servant is one of the most highly discussed issues in modern scholarship. Critical scholarship is not inclined to take the Song as pointing forward to Jesus. But in Jesus’ day, the application to Jesus was apparently not made by anyone until after the resurrection. Why?

The Servant in Isaiah 50:4-10

Though the highpoint of the Servant’s task focuses on Isaiah 53, an important preamble comes in 50:4-10. And we must keep in mind the question of how much the Servant was a model for Israel, for Jesus, and for us:

Isaiah 50:4 The Lord God has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.
Morning by morning he wakens—
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.
5 The Lord God has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backward.
6 I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.
7 The Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,

and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
 8 he who vindicates me is near.
 Who will contend with me?
 Let us stand up together.
 Who are my adversaries?
 Let them confront me.
 9 It is the Lord God who helps me;
 who will declare me guilty?
 All of them will wear out like a garment;
 the moth will eat them up.
 10 *Who among you fears the Lord
 and obeys the voice of his servant,
 who walks in darkness
 and has no light,
 yet trusts in the name of the Lord
 and relies upon his God?*

Question: To what extent was verse 10 fulfilled in Jesus?

Comment: Can it be said of Jesus' followers that they fear the Lord, and obey the servant *who walks in darkness and has no light, yet trusts in the name of the Lord and relies upon his God?*

One of the most significant indications of the Jewish idea of the role of the Messiah at the time of Christ is the translation of Isaiah 53 in the Jewish Targum (Targum Jonathan). A *targum* is an Aramaic paraphrase of the Old Testament. The Old Testament was written mostly in Hebrew, but in Jesus' day, the language of the people was Aramaic. Jesus spoke Aramaic. In fact a couple of notable quotes from Jesus are given in Aramaic in the Gospels. In Mark 5:41 Jesus says to Jairus' daughter: "Talitha cum" – and Mark interprets for us: "Little girl, get up" (NRSV).

On the cross, Mark records another Aramaic saying and gives the translation: "At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34, NRSV).

In the lines that follow, the English translation of the original Hebrew is followed by the English translation of the Aramaic Targum. The Targum was no doubt written as polemic against the Christian interpretation. Note how it transforms the suffering servant into a conquering king:

53:3	Hebrew	He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of torments and acquainted with infirmity and like one from whom one hides his face, he was despised and we esteemed him not.
	<i>Targum</i>	<i>Then he shall be contemptuous of, and bring to an end, the glory of all the kingdoms; they shall become weak and afflicted, lo, like a man in pain and accustomed to illness, and like us, when the Shekinah had departed from us, leaving us despised and without esteem.</i>

- 53:4 Hebrew Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our torments, but we considered him smitten with disease, stricken by God, and afflicted.
- Targum* *Then he shall seek pardon for our sins, and our iniquities shall be forgiven for his sake; though we are considered stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.*
- 53:5 Hebrew And he was wounded by our transgressions, he was crushed by our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we were healed.
- Targum* *And he shall rebuild the Temple, which was profaned because of our sins, and which was surrendered because of our iniquities; through his instruction, his peace shall abound for us, and when we teach his words our sins shall be forgiven us.*
- 53:6 Hebrew All of us like sheep have wandered, we have turned each in his own direction, but the Lord has inflicted upon him the iniquity of us all.
- Targum* *All of us were scattered like sheep, we were exiled, each in his own direction, but it is the will of God to pardon the sins of all of us on his account.*

Question: Why was it no one in Jesus' day wanted to hear the message of the suffering servant? Why was it that even the disciples didn't believe it until after the resurrection

Question: Is it difficult for believers today to admit that our sins wound our Savior?

Theme: Waging Love

Leading Question: How many chapters in Isaiah could be seen as nothing but good news?

Isaiah 55 breaks into 5 paragraphs. Let's evaluate each one to see how it might relate on a good new/bad news scale:

Buy good things for free

Isa. 55:1 Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
3 Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.
4 See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.
5 See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you.

God abundantly pardons because his ways are higher than our ways

6 Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
7 let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

God's words will accomplish their nurturing purpose

10 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Joy and fertility forever

12 For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

After the good news of chapter 55, chapter 58 includes rebuke. After calling the people to account for practicing religious ritual but neglecting service, Isaiah lists the things that please God the most after noting the behaviors that he rejects:

The Rebuke:

Isa. 58:3 "Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.
4 Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
5 Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?

The ideal:

Isa 58:6 "Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Question: On calling the Sabbath a delight. The last two verses in Isaiah 58 link the idea of self-denial with pleasure, an intriguing paradox:

Isa. 58:13-14: If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;
if you call the sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the Lord honorable;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;
14 then you shall take delight in the Lord,
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;
I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Question: How is it possible *not* to pursue our own interests on the Sabbath – but still to experience it as a delight?

Comment: This excerpt from G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi*, may help illustrate how self-denial can turn into a glorious treasure:

All these profound matters must be suggested in short and imperfect phrases; and the shortest statement of one aspect of this illumination is to say that it is the discovery of an infinite debt. It may seem a paradox to say that a man may be transported with joy to discover that he is in debt. But this is only because in commercial cases the creditor does not generally share the transports of joy; especially when the debt is by hypothesis infinite and therefore unrecoverable. But here again the parallel of a natural love-story of the nobler sort disposes of the difficulty in a flash. There the infinite creditor does share the joy of the infinite debtor; for indeed they are both debtors and both creditors. In other words debt and dependence do become pleasures in the presence of unspoilt love; the word is used too loosely and luxuriously in popular simplifications like the present; but here the word is really the key. It is the key of all the problems of Franciscan morality which puzzle the merely modern mind; but above all it is the key of asceticism. It is the highest and holiest of the paradoxes that the man who really knows he cannot pay his debt will be for ever paying it. He will be for ever giving back what he cannot give back, and cannot be expected to give back. He will be always throwing things away into a bottomless pit of unfathomable thanks. Men who think they are too modern to understand

this are in fact too mean to understand it; we are most of us too mean to practise it. We are not generous enough to be ascetics; one might almost say not genial enough to be ascetics. A man must have magnanimity of surrender, of which he commonly only catches a glimpse in first love, like a glimpse of our lost Eden. But whether he sees it or not, the truth is in that riddle; that the whole world has, or is, only one good thing; and it is a bad debt.

If ever that rarer sort of romantic love, which was the truth that sustained the Troubadours, falls out of fashion and is treated as fiction, we may see some such misunderstanding as that of the modern world about asceticism. For it seems conceivable that some barbarians might try to destroy chivalry in love, as the barbarians ruling in Berlin destroyed chivalry in war. If that were ever so, we should have the same sort of unintelligent sneers and unimaginative questions. Men will ask what selfish sort of woman it must have been who ruthlessly exacted tribute in the form of flowers, or what an avaricious creature she can have been to demand solid gold in the form of a ring; just as they ask what cruel kind of God can have demanded sacrifice and self-denial. They will have lost the clue to all that lovers have meant by love; and will not understand that it was because the thing was not demanded that it was done. But whether or no any such lesser things will throw a light on the greater, it is utterly useless to study a great thing like the Franciscan movement while remaining in the modern mood that murmurs against gloomy asceticism. The whole point about St. Francis of Assisi is that he certainly was ascetical and he certainly was not gloomy. As soon as ever he had been unhorsed by the glorious humiliation of his vision of dependence on the divine love, he flung himself into fasting and vigil exactly as he had flung himself furiously into battle. He had wheeled his charger clean round, but there was no halt or check in the thundering impetuosity of his charge. There was nothing negative about it; it was not a regimen or a stoical simplicity of life. It was not self-denial merely in the sense of self-control. It was as positive as a passion; it had all the air of being as positive as a pleasure. He devoured fasting as a man devours food. He plunged after poverty as men have dug madly for gold. And it is precisely the positive and passionate quality of this part of his personality that is a challenge to the modern mind in the whole problem of the pursuit of pleasure. There undeniably is the historical fact; and there attached to it is another moral fact almost as undeniable. It is certain that he held on this heroic or unnatural course from the moment when he went forth in his hair-shirt into the winter woods to the moment when he desired even in his death agony to lie bare upon the bare ground, to prove that he had and that he was nothing. And we can say, with almost as deep a certainty, that the stars which passed above that gaunt and wasted corpse stark upon the rocky floor had for once, in all their shining cycles round the world of labouring humanity, looked down upon a happy man.

Theme: Desire of Nations

Leading Question: Is Isaiah clear about salvation, or do we need the New Testament?

Isaiah 59 opens with a question about Yahweh’s ability to save. The response? “The Lord’s hand is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. Rather, your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God. . . .” The chapter continues with a strong rebuke. A succinct summary of the contents of Isaiah 59 is as follows:

Isaiah 59:1-8	Rebuke
9-15	Confession in the first person plural
15b -19	The Lord springs into action against the disobedient
20-21	The Lord’s enduring commitment to the faithful

Question: How close to the doctrine of “original sin” does the indictment in 1-8 come? The official study guide takes us to the New Testament. But can we find what we need to know about salvation in the Old Testament? In Isaiah? How were people saved before the death and resurrection of Christ? Is God’s commitment to his people (vs. 20-21) conditioned on obedience?

When we outline chapter 60, we find that except for one verse (60:12), it is free from rebuke, and the one verse of rebuke is against other nations, not against Israel: “For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish; those nations shall be utterly laid waste.”

Isaiah 60:1-11	International acclaim for the restored Israel
12	Obliteration of those nations who do not recognize Israel
13-18	Rich and enduring renewal for Israel
19-22	Enduring blessings for Israel

The early verses of Isaiah 61 are famous because they are quoted in Luke 4:16-19. The parallels and the omissions are significant:

Isaiah 61:1 The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
2 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn.

Luke 4:16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll

of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

18 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Question: What is the significance of the omission of “the day of vengeance of our God” from the New Testament passage? Since there is much less vengeance in the NT than in the OT, does that mean that God is gradually weaning the world from a commitment to violence?

The remainder of chapter 61 is a glowing account of Israel’s restored future (61:2b-11), which gives a very positive view of this these three chapters: Isaiah 59-61.

Question: Given the way that the book of Isaiah is constructed, do we see a deliberate attempt on the part of the inspired authors/editors to balance rebuke and comfort? In contrast with Isaiah 40-66 which is largely comfort, Isaiah 1-35 is largely rebuke. Given our human condition, will the need for rebuke ever completely disappear before Christ returns?

Theme: Rebirth of Planet Earth

Leading Question: What are the main differences between Isaiah’s vision of the New Earth and the one in Revelation?

Probably the most significant difference between Isaiah’s vision of the New Earth and the one in Revelation 21-22 is that Isaiah’s points to the gradual end of evil instead of the sudden one portrayed in Revelation.

Probably nothing in the Bible is more divisive than the topic of eschatology (= “the study of last things.”) In today’s Christian world, there are four major perspectives on eschatology. These are briefly summarized below. The first one on the list, historicism, is the classic reformation view generally held by Adventists.

Eschatology: Four Perspectives

- A. **“All-time Road Map.” HISTORICISM: A single road-map through history leads up to end-time events.** This is the traditional Adventist perspective, rooted in Daniel 2 and 7 and shaped by the teaching of the great reformers.
- B. **“Yesterday.” PRETERISM: “End-time” events are not predictions at all, but were based on events in the author’s own day.** In its pure form, this view is held by “liberals” who deny the predictive element in prophecy or any “real” end of time.
- C. **“Tomorrow.” FUTURISM: “End-time” events are yet to come.** In its pure form, this view denies conditional prophecy. It is the most popular view of eschatology among conservative Christians today (cf. “Left Behind” [movie]). Unfulfilled events in the Bible (especially from the OT) are predicted to take place at some future point to a literal and restored Israel. The temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem at the site of the Moslem mosque, Dome of the Rock. The best-known modern form of futurism is **Dispensationalism**. Note the seven-fold division of history (fully developed in the Scofield Bible notes):
 - 1. Innocence: Before the fall
 - 2. Conscience: Before the flood
 - 3. Human government: Before Abraham
 - 4. Promise: Before Sinai
 - 5. Law: Before the Cross
 - 6. Grace: Before Second Advent
 - 7. Kingdom: 7 years and millennium.

Note: The seven year period falls between the secret coming of Christ (“rapture” [*parousia*]) and the public coming [*epiphaneia*]; the saved spend the next 1000 years on earth, during which there is birth, death, and animal sacrifice.

D. **“Today, Today, Today!” IDEALISM/APPLIED HISTORICISM. Major “End-time” historicist applications are retained, but are re-applied to new situations.** From an Adventist perspective, this approach suggests that there were several points in history when Christ could have come. It builds on the concept of “conditional” prophecy. Note the summary of God's “original” plan for Israel, based on SDABC 4:25-38:

1. **On-site Evangelism.** The world would be attracted to God by Israel’s witness and prosperity. Many would ask to become part of Israel.
2. **Salvation through the Messiah.** God’s anointed one (the messiah) would have come, died, and risen again, but would have been accepted by his own people.
3. **Jerusalem as Missionary Headquarters.** The present city of Jerusalem would have become a center for outreach into the whole world.
4. **Final Confrontation but the Gradual Elimination of Evil.** A confrontation would finally take place between good and evil; God’s rule would be established; but the marks of evil would gradually disappear.

Note: The phrase “applied historicism” is one that I have used as a bridge between traditional historicism and so-called idealism, i.e. multiple applications. And it is an approach suggested in the book of Revelation itself. Virtually all scholars agree that “Babylon” in Revelation is a code word for Rome. But because it was too dangerous to refer to Rome by name, the author used the ancient label, “Babylon,” a power long since gone, but which was useful for designating the new “beast.”

In Adventism, something like applied historicism was used by Morris Venden in the 1970s when he would say, “Now we all know who the beast is historically. But now let’s look in the mirror. Are you acting like the beast? If the shoe fits, wear it!”

Another familiar application in Adventist history appears in connection with the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3. All scholars would agree on the “preterist” application, i.e. seven literal churches in the first century. Adventism, following the historicist pattern assigned each church to an era of history. Something close to applied historicism could happen at the personal level, with each person deciding whether they were more like, Ephesus, Smyrna, or Thyatira. Interestingly enough Adventists originally saw themselves as belonging to the Philadelphian church, with the nominal Adventists being Laodicea. Suddenly, in the mid 1850s James White dropped a bombshell: Guess what, he said. Adventists are the church of Laodicea!

The seven churches are not the ideal example because I know of no attempt to apply the seven churches from a futurist perspective and envision seven literal churches in the future.

Question: What specific aspects from Isaiah would differ from the NT view of the restored earth?

Comment: Isaiah 65:20 indicates that there will still be death, but no premature death in the restored earth: “No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.”

Comment: Another difference is the evidence of sin that still lingers after the earth has been restored. The last three verses of the book (Isa. 66:22-4) make the point:

Isaiah 66: 22: For as the new heavens and the new earth,
which I will make,
shall remain before me, says the Lord;
so shall your descendants and your name remain.

23 From new moon to new moon,
and from sabbath to sabbath,
all flesh shall come to worship before me,
says the Lord.

24 And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled
against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be
an abhorrence to all flesh.

The one clear point that stands out in the comparison between Revelation is restoration. That would also be the common ground with Isaiah's vegetarian kingdom as described in 11:6-9:

Isaiah 11:6-11: The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
7 The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
9 They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea. (NRSV)

Finally, one of the jewels of Ellen White's writings come in the closing three paragraphs of her book, *The Great Controversy*. These lines are quoted in the official study guide and they make a fitting close to our lessons on Isaiah:

And the years of eternity, as they roll, will bring richer and still more glorious revelations of God and of Christ. As knowledge is progressive, so will love, reverence, and happiness increase. The more men learn of God, the greater will be their admiration of His character. As Jesus opens before them the riches of redemption and the amazing achievements in the great controversy with Satan, the hearts of the ransomed thrill with more fervent devotion, and with more rapturous joy they sweep the harps of gold; and ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands of voices unite to swell the mighty chorus of praise.

“And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever”— Rev. 5:13.

The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire

universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation. From Him who created all, flow life and light and gladness, throughout the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love. – *The Great Controversy*, 678