

ISRAEL

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Israel was constituted as the people of God during the Exodus out of Egypt. The period of the Patriarchs that preceded the Exodus had enduring meaning only because it created the conditions which enabled the Exodus. The history of Israel after the Exodus had special significance only because it was the history of the people of God, and therefore the history of God's revealed plan of salvation for the human race. That, of course, represented the perspective of the believer, whether Jew or Christian. So questions must be asked . . . was the Exodus a real historical event? . . . was the account of those events in the *Book of Exodus* of the *Old Testament* historically accurate? . . . can the reality of the Exodus be rendered compelling even for those unwilling to accept it as an article of faith? The answer to all three questions was a resounding yes. The compelling case for the Exodus derived from following areas of reflection:

- ◆ The necessary pre-conditions for the Exodus including the history of God's promise to Abraham, and the fundamental necessity of slavery.
- ◆ The meaning and consequence of the struggle between Moses and Pharaoh over which was the true carrier of divine truth and authority.
- ◆ The formation of the people of God in the desert while in the continuous presence of God.
- ◆ The social organization and authority as set down by Moses, and implemented by Israel during the period of the Judges.
- ◆ The prophets.

Divine Preparation

Slavery was a necessary formative experience for the people of God. The Hebrews of the Patriarchal Period could not have become the Israel of the Exodus if they were in any way enamored with, or humbled by, the apparent power and wealth of the most dominate culture of the ancient world. It was essential they experienced that culture as oppressive, and founded on untruth. They had to long for freedom, but not be broken in spirit. The objective was *the people of God* and that required cohesion. Cohesion through adversity required hope that could be transferred from generation to generation. A tradition of hope depended upon a prior tradition of God's faithfulness. Therefore, Israel was prepared for the Exodus through slavery, and it was imbued with the spiritual strength to retain its cohesion and hope during slavery through the prior

tradition of the Patriarchal Period.

The Battle between two claims to divine truth

The most important sentence in Exodus was:

“And you (Moses) shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the Lord, Israel is my first-born son . . .’ (Exodus 4:22)¹

It was revolutionary because Pharaoh, by virtue of his position as ruler of Egypt, was revered as the human through which the god Horus or Re established their presence in the earth realm.² In other words, Moses declared Pharaoh’s divine identity false, and declared the Egyptian god false. It was a shockingly bold and traitorous statement. It likely would have resulted in Moses immediate execution had he not previously been a member of the Egyptian royal household by virtue of his adoption by Pharaoh’s daughter. (Exodus 2:1-10)

To understand the full import of the battle of signs and wonders between Pharaoh and Moses (Exodus 7:8 thru 12:34) that followed, it must be stipulated that two claims to absolute truth could not coexist. They would inevitably war against each other until one prevailed. The best confirmation of that inevitable clash between coexisting claims to absolute truth was the “Cold War” in the modern period between communism and democratic capitalism. The “Cold War” continued until communism collapsed. Therefore, the following logical propositions must be applied to Exodus.

- I. A battle between Moses and Pharaoh was inevitable once Pharaoh became aware of Moses’ claims and intentions. Pharaoh could not allow a competing claim to absolute truth stand unchallenged. To do so would severely weaken his stature and the social consensus that empowered his kingdom.
- II. The battle could not have been a military battle because Moses had no army, and would have been immediately and completely crushed by Pharaoh’s overwhelmingly superior army.
- III. The battle could not have been a military battle because such a battle, whether won or lost, was incapable, at the base level of soldier against soldier, of addressing the reason for the conflict. That was so because the issues were spiritual and therefore had to be resolved between those who claimed spiritual power and authority, namely, Moses and Pharaoh.
- IV. The only way Moses or Pharaoh could win such a spiritual battle was to demonstrate in the practical, the divine power and authority they claimed. It had to be evident that such a demonstration was divine. An action that was not divine was tantamount to immediate defeat.
- V. Once the battle was known to be necessary, one or the other could lose, or both could lose. But only one could win. That was so because once a leader was forced to manifest his claim of divine power and authority, the subsequent manifestation had to be divine regardless of the action or actions of any other person or groups of persons.
- VI. The plagues are repugnant to modern humans, and most often viewed

¹ Biblical citations will be from the Revised Standard Version.

² ORDER AND HISTORY, Volume 1, Israel and Revelation; Eric Voegelin, Louisiana State University Press, 1956, pages 72-73.

as fantasy or illusion. But the battle had to be won by manifestation of the divine. If the plagues were not the actual manifestation of the divine, then what were the divine manifestations? . . . and how would such other divine manifestations be more palatable to modern humans?

- VII. Moses won the battle.
- VIII. Pharaoh did not understand the consequence of loss until after Moses and the Hebrews departed, at which time he sent his army to crush them. The dispatch of the army arose from the realization that Pharaoh, and his kingdom, has suffered a mortal blow. The dispatch of the army was a futile gesture since the mortal wound had already been sustained.
- IX. That no record of the Exodus, or the events surrounding the Exodus, was ever found in Egyptian historical documents had no significance. That was so because all cultures, including all modern cultures, who once proclaimed themselves to be the carrier of absolute truth, developed very strong cultural taboos to protect their core beliefs from inquiry, challenge and/or diminution. That, in turn, enabled leaders to hide or misrepresent failure.

Formation of the people of God

God told Moses, “*And you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the Lord, Israel is my first-born son . . .’*” (Exodus 4:22). The Lord did not tell Moses he was king of the Hebrews, nor did he tell him he would have all authority over those people. The Lord told Moses, “*Israel is my first-born son.*” The difficulty with that revelation was the Hebrews had no idea what it meant. Their Patriarchal history had included several great men of God, and they kept alive the history of the promises of God given to those Patriarchs, but there was no concept of individual importance. During that Patriarchal period the only virtue that mattered was the virtue of the Patriarch. Individuals were only unknown workers within the household or tribe of the Patriarch. The leadership of Moses was quickly embraced by the Hebrews because he appeared in every way a Patriarch. And, of course, the Hebrews were expecting just such a leader; “*And Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am about to die; but God will visit you, and bring you up out of this land to the land which he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.’*” (Genesis 50:24) But Moses was not called in the model of a Patriarch. Rather, he was called to be God’s instrument in effecting the transformation of the enslaved Hebrews into the *first-born son* of God. The task was all the more daunting because there was no prior history of such a concept, and, indeed, no other culture for many centuries developed even a remotely similar concept of social organization. It was an advance in the affirmation of the dignity and importance of individual humans so dramatic, and so unprecedented, it had to have been divine revelation.³

Such a revelation could never have been carried forward on the very shallow level of intellectual concept. It had to be fused into the soul of every Hebrew as the Will of God, the identity of a people, and the most fundamental definition of reality. The following logical propositions must be set down regarding the formation of the Hebrews into the *people of God*.

- I. Withdrawal into the desert was absolutely essential in order to minimize interaction with other peoples who were defined by a different and more familiar system of values. That was so because the radically new definition of being delivered by Moses was too weak and too tentative in the hearts and souls of the Hebrews to survive criticism and competition.

³ ORDER AND HISTORY, *ibid.*, Chapter 4, “Israel and History,” pages 116 ff.

- II. The period of withdrawal had to have been sufficiently long in duration to allow the development and expansion of language to accommodate and express the new understanding of God and being. The requisite language would not achieve the necessary strength until it penetrated to the depth of unconscious perception and expression.
- III. The period of withdrawal had to have been sufficiently long in duration for the elders and leaders of the previous definition of God and being to pass away. That was so because their self-worth and authority would have been too heavily invested in the previous definition, and that would have disposed them to resistance. Two generations would have seemed a minimum requirement.
- IV. The formative period of withdrawal had to have been sufficiently miraculous to remain the foundation upon which the *people of God* constructed their reality for an unlimited period of time into the future. It had to have been sufficiently miraculous to remain the perfect goal to which the *people of God* moved forever. It had to have been sufficiently miraculous to remain the datum to which the *people of God* returned in times of cultural stress and/or confusion. That need was satisfied with the *Passover* (Exodus 12:1ff), a continuous presence of God in the form of a *pillar of cloud by day*, and a *pillar of fire by night* (Exodus 13:22), the crossing of the *sea of reeds* (Exodus 14:2), and the revelation on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:16ff).
- V. The new definition of God and being had to have made provision for the practical needs of the *people of God* fully consistent with that new definition. Failure to do so would have forced the *people of God* to conform to systems of agriculture and commerce generated by other value systems, and that, in turn, would have introduced a fatal compromise into the new definition. The requisite provision for such practical needs was accomplished with the *rain of bread from heaven* (Exodus 16:4ff), the quail that flew in and covered the camp (Exodus 16:13), and the water from rock (Exodus 17:6).
- VI. The formative period of withdrawal had to have included the clear definition of the prescriptive behavior necessary to maintain the integrity of the new definition of God and being, and to power that new definition into the future. Failure to provide a clear definition of prescriptive behavior would have caused the Hebrews to regress to behavior patterns learned during their enslavement, and that would have caused God's initiative to disintegrate at an early stage of development. The essential behavior was set forth in *The Decalogue* at Mount Sinai. (Exodus 19:1ff)

Social Organization and Authority

When God said *Israel is my first-born son*, the fundamental cornerstone was set for a new order of being so unique in human experience that it was judged by many in later centuries as contrived or imagined. Those judgements must be set aside for three very powerful reasons:

- I. All of the major elements of the Exodus experience were necessary and relevant, and together formed a cohesive whole from which no single element could have been removed without a fatal consequence for the whole.
- II. The concept of social organization created by the Exodus experience defined the subsequent period of the Judges.
- III. The concept of authority invested in Moses was modeled by the Judges and the Prophets of later centuries.

The entry of Israel into the promise land was noted in the opening sentence of Joshua:

“After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ minister, ‘Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into this land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel.’” (Joshua 1:1-2 RSV)

The statement, *“Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise . . .”* was precise and intentional. Moses was God’s servant, granted divine authority to act as God’s agent in leading the Hebrews out of slavery and forming them into *the people of God*. He was not their king, and therefore had no legal claim to authority over the people beyond his function as agent. God had made it very clear in the Covenant, *“ . . . you shall be my own possession among all peoples . . .”* (Exodus 19:5). The authority granted Moses was therefore limited, and mission oriented. He was not permitted to cross into the promise land because his mission had been successfully completed. That did not mean the formation was complete. Only that Moses’ work was completed. The presence of Moses beyond the successful completion of his mission would have undermined that success, and compromised the social structure of Israel. The clear intent of God was, *“Israel is my first born son,”* and no person, not even Moses, was allowed to limit that relationship.

Leadership in Israel from Moses to the Monarchy complied with the model established with Moses. Judges were appointed directly by God without prior consultation with Israel or with the previous leader. The authority of Judges was limited in that they were not permitted to change the law or the covenant. Neither were they allowed to impose taxes, raise a standing army, nor construct government buildings. Some, such as Joshua, retained their authority for life. Others, such as Gideon and Samuel, were relieved of their role as Judge before death. And there were periods without any Judge, for example: a period after Joshua (Judges 2:6-15), forty years after Othniel (Judges 3:13), and eighty years after Ehud. (Judges 3:30). God’s purpose remained the formation and development of Israel, the *“first born son,”* which was a people, intended to have direct access to their God. That, of course, entailed responsibility. Responsibility for appropriation and preservation of the Covenant. Responsibility for living out the prescriptive behavior demanded by the Covenant. That kind of responsibility required maturity and courage. The lack of courage and/or maturity in the people generated several cycles of apostasy during the period of the Judges. Then finally to a demand that Samuel, the last Judge, appoint a king over Israel.

“Then all of the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah and said to him, ‘Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint for us a king to govern us like all the nations.’ But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, ‘Give us a king to govern us.’ And Samuel prayed to Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Hearken to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.’” (1 Samuel 8:4-7)

But as a condition of granting Israel’s request for a king *like all nations*, the Lord required Samuel to warn Israel of the consequences:

“These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers

and to his servants. He will take your menservants and maidservants, and best of your cattle and your asses, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.” (1 Samuel 8:11-18)

“But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; and they said, ‘No! but we will have a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.’” (1 Samuel 8:19-20)

Israel got their king. Saul was tall, very handsome, from a wealthy family, and when he approached Samuel in the land of Zuph, the Lord said, *“Here is the man of whom I spoke to you! He it is who shall rule over my people.”* (1 Samuel 9:17) Samuel anointed Saul to be King of Israel and he was accepted by the people as their King. But Samuel still felt obligated to again tell the people of their mistake, *“... you said to me, ‘No, but a king shall rule over us,’ when the Lord your God was your King,”* (1 Samuel 12:12) *“... and you shall know and see that your wickedness is great, which you have done in the sight of the Lord, in asking for yourselves a king.”* (1 Samuel 12:17) Saul promptly disobeyed the Lord at Gilgal (1 Samuel 13:8ff) and then again at Amalek. (1 Samuel 15:1ff) The second act of disobedience caused the Lord to reject Saul, *“I repent that I have made Saul king; for he has turned back from following me, and has not performed my commandments.”* (1 Samuel 15:10)

Saul was then instructed by the Lord to anoint David, the youngest son of Jesse.

“The Lord said to Samuel . . . ‘Fill your horn with oil, and go; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provide myself a king among his sons.’” (1 Samuel 16:1)

“And Samuel said to Jesse, ‘Are all your sons here?’ And he said, ‘There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep.’ And Samuel said to Jesse, ‘Send and fetch him; for we will not sit down till he comes here.’ And he sent, and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. And the Lord said, ‘Arise, anoint him; for this is he.’ Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brothers, and the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.” (1 Samuel 16:11-13)

David was said to have killed the Philistine giant, Goliath, with a stone and a sling while still quite young. (1 Samuel 17:41ff) David was endowed with grace and inspiration as he matured into the role of king. His accomplishments as king were legendary. He was so successful as a military strategist and so accomplished in his political acumen, that Israel reached the zenith of its power and prosperity under his rule. And he remained one of the most celebrated figures in human history.

But in his mature years King David sinned by having an adulterous affair with the beautiful Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:1ff) and then baiting her husband into trusting him, and then arranging for him to be killed in battle.

“And David invited him (Uriah), and he ate in his presence and drank, so that he made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house. In the morning David wrote a letter to Joah, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. In the letter he wrote, ‘Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, that he may be struck down, and die.’” (2 Samuel 11:19-15)

David was rebuked by the Prophet Nathan for his sin against Uriah (2 Samuel 12:1ff), and repented,

still the child conceived by Bathsheba died. David impregnated Bathsheba a second time and she gave birth to Solomon (2 Samuel 12:24), who succeeded David as king.

Problems plagued David's family. His son Ammon became sexually obsessed with his other son Absalom's sister Tamar, then first raped her and then scorned her. Absalom avenged his sister's humiliation by killing Ammon, then generated intrigue and finally open rebellion in the court of David. Absalom's life ended in an ignominious death. (2 Samuel 13:1 thru 19:9).

David also committed a grave sin by ordering a census of the people, thereby publicly disavowing his trust in God. When the census returned a count of 800,000 valiant men capable of drawing a sword in Israel and 500,000 in Judah, David realized his sin:

“I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O Lord, I pray thee, take away the iniquity of thy servant; for I have done very foolishly.” And then David arose in the morning, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, ‘Go and say to David, ‘Thus says the Lord, Three things I offer you; choose one of them, that I may do it to you.’ So Gad came to David and told him, and said to him, ‘Shall three years of famine come to you in your land? Or will you flee three months before your foes while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days’ pestilence in your land? Now consider, and decide what answer I shall return to him who sent me.’ Then David said to Gad, ‘I am in great distress; let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into the hand of man.’ So the Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel from the morning until the appointed time; and there died of the people from Dan to Beer-sheba seventy thousand men.” (2 Samuel 24:10-15)

Solomon, the son of Bathsheba, succeeded his father, David, on the throne. His reign was at first impressive. He was endowed with great wisdom and knowledge. (1 Kings 3:1ff) He built the temple (1 Kings 6:1ff), and he became very wealthy (1 Kings 10:14ff). But he had a weakness for women . . . *“He had seven hundred wives of royal rank, and three hundred concubines,”* (1 Kings 11:3) and they swayed his heart toward their false gods . . . *“Solomon became a follower of Astarte, the goddess of the Sidonians, and of Milcom, the Ammonite abomination.”* (1 Kings 11:5)

Solomon was succeeded by his son Rehoboam, (1 Kings 11:43) who was cruel:

“And now, whereas my father laid upon you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions.” (1 Kings 12:11)

Rehoboam's cruelty led to a schism, and all of the tribes except Judah followed Jeroboam, son of Nebat. The *people of god* had permanently split into Israel and Judah, and neither fared well.

“And the Lord said to Ahijah, ‘Behold, the wife of Jeroboam is coming to inquire of you concerning her son; for he is sick . . . When she came, she pretended to be another woman. But when Ahijah heard the sound of her feet, as she came in at the door, he said, ‘Come in, wife of Jeroboam; why do you pretend to be another?’ For I am charged with heavy tidings for you. Go, tell Jeroboam, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: ‘Because I exalted you from among the people, and made you leader over my people Israel, and tore the kingdom away from the house of David and gave it to you . . . but (you) have done evil above all . . . made for yourself other gods, and molten images, provoking me to anger . . . I will bring evil upon the house of Jeroboam, and will cut off from Jeroboam every male, both bond and free in Israel, and will utterly consume the house of Jeroboam, as a man burns up dung until it is all gone..’” (1 Kings 14:5-10)

About fifty years later, during the reign of King Ahab, the Lord gave Israel another chance by sending the prophet Elijah. Many miracles were accomplished through Elijah, in addition to victory for Ahab over king Ben-hadad of Aram (1 Kings 20:1ff), but with little lasting effect. Indeed, shortly after the victory over king Ben-hadad, Ahab resumed his repugnant behavior. The Lord, therefore, pronounced judgement through Elijah on Ahab, all of his descendants, and every male belonging to the family of Ahab. (1 Kings 21:17ff) The sentence was carried out by Jehu. (2 Kings 9:1ff)

Israel survived about another one hundred fifty years, and then was completely destroyed by Assyria.

“In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria captured Samaria, and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria, and placed them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of Medes.” (2 Kings 17:5-6)

“And the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the people of Israel; and they took possession of Samaria, and dwelt in its cities.” (2 Kings 17:24)

Thus the origin of the Samaritans known in the time of Jesus.

The history of the monarchy in Judah was no more impressive than it was in Israel. Some rebelled against God and some sought to serve God, but all were lackluster. The rulers of Judah included a woman, Athaliah, the mother of Ahaziah. After the death of Ahaziah she murdered everyone of royal stock in the House of Judah except Joash who was hidden from her. (2 Chronicles 22:10ff) Joash was one year old at the time, and became king at the age of seven. (2 Chronicles 24:1) Judah was effectively ruled by the priest Jehoiada during Joash's minority years. (2 Chronicles 23:1ff)

In addition to Joash, Judah had the following minority kings:

- ◆ Uzziah, age 16. (2 Chronicles 26:1)
- ◆ Manasseh, age 12. (2 Chronicles 33:1)
- ◆ Josiah, age 8. (2 Chronicles 34:1)
- ◆ Jehoiachin, age 8. (2 Chronicles 36:9)

Zedekiah followed Jehoiachin and was the last king of Judah. In the eleventh year of his reign, in the fourth month, on the ninth day, a breach was made in the wall of Jerusalem by the forces of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. That night, Zedekiah tried to sneak away from Jerusalem and the looming battle, but was caught on the plain of Jericho by the forces of Nebuchadnezzar. His sons were slaughtered in his presence, his eyes were put out, and he was taken to Babylon. (2 Kings) Thus an ignominious end for Judah.

The institution of the monarchy in Israel and Judah was ineffective. Certainly David was a remarkable figure, but the same cannot be said of any succeeding king. The pattern therefore, was a dramatic beginning under David, an extended period of decline, and then collapse. The same pattern could also be applied to Egypt under the Pharaohs. All of the large pyramids and other important structures were built during the early period, followed by an extended period of decline, and then collapse. However, the earthly accomplishments of Egypt far exceeded those of David, and their period of dominance lasted much longer. The same can be said of several ancient cultures, and certainly a larger number of more modern cultures. The remarkable thing about the history of Israel was not the history of the monarchy, but rather the rich history that preceded the monarchy, and continued after the monarchy. It was clear from the exchange between the Lord and Samuel⁴ that the people of Israel wanted a king, but what were the real reasons they were willing to give up so much for a monarchy? . . . and how did Israel survive its collapse?

⁴ Page 6 above.

The first king of Israel was Saul. The decision to anoint Saul king was made by the Lord in response to the people of Israel's rejection of direct rule by the himself, and that decision was communicated through Samuel.⁵ All subsequent communication from the Lord to Saul also came through Samuel. Saul's first offense against the Lord occurred at Gilgal (1 Samuel 13:8ff) where Saul had been instructed to wait for Samuel. Samuel had said he would arrive within seven days. Samuel did not arrive within the seven day period and Saul's army began to desert him. So Saul offered the holocaust without Samuel. Samuel arrived just as Saul completed the offering and he was furious, but Saul's explanation didn't appear unreasonable.

“And Saul said, ‘When I saw that the people were scattering from me, and you did not come within the days appointed, and the Philistines had mustered at Michmash, I said: Now the Philistines will come down on me at Gilgal, and I have not treated the favor of the Lord;’ so I forced myself, and offered the burnt offering.’ And Samuel said to Saul, ‘You have done foolishly; you have not kept the commandments of the Lord your God, which he commanded you; for now the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel for ever. But now your kingdom shall not continue . . .’” (1 Samuel 13:11-14)

Saul's second sin occurred at the end of the holy war against the Amalekites. The Lord's instruction to Saul through Samuel was, “. . . kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.” (1 Samuel 15:3) But Saul spared the life of king Agag, the best sheep, oxen, fatlings, and lambs. Samuel was furious . . . so furious he, “. . . hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord . . .” (1 Samuel 15:33) Though Saul confessed his sin, “. . . I pray, pardon my sin, and return with me, that I may worship the Lord,” he was not forgiven. (1 Samuel 15:25)

Samuel was immediately instructed by the Lord to anoint David. That anointing was followed by a period of rivalry between David and Saul. Saul was afraid and jealous of David, and tried to kill him in order to prevent him from becoming king. David, on the other hand, conducted himself with honor. The rivalry continued until Saul, along with his sons Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchishua, was killed in the battle of Gilboa. (1 Samuel 31:1-2)

David was immediately anointed king of Judah. (2 Samuel 2:4) But Abner, Saul's army commander, made Saul's remaining son, Ishbaal, king over all of Israel. War ensued between Judah and Israel. Judah prevailed and David was anointed king over Israel, (2 Samuel 5:1-3) and thereby united Judah and Israel. David's subsequent success as a politician and military commander was so remarkable little notice was given to his war with Israel, and David's personal sins were readily excused. Further, he named his son, Solomon, his successor, not in response to a directive from the Lord, but in response to the plea of Bathsheba. (1 Kings 1:11-37) Indeed, the custom of the king's right to appoint his successor remained throughout the monarchical period. That was consistent with the custom in other cultures throughout the ages, and the demand by the elders presented to Samuel for a king was; “. . . now appoint for us a king to govern us like all the nations.” (1 Samuel 8:5) Did Abner know David had been anointed by Samuel at the direction of the Lord? Apparently not, for Samuel expressed fear to the Lord when instructed to anoint David, saying: “How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.” (1 Samuel 16:2) To which the Lord proposed a deception: “And the Lord said, ‘Take a heifer with you, and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.’” (1 Samuel 16:2-3) Though Samuel anointed David in the presence of his brothers, (1 Samuel 16:13) he did not tell them why David was being anointed. When David's father, Jesse, sent David to Saul's military camp to take food to his brothers, and where David would first hear of Goliath, he expressed no knowledge of his anointing. (1 Samuel 17:17-19) When David delivered the food to his brothers, Eliab, the eldest, expressed anger:

“‘Why have you come down here?’ he said. ‘Whom have you left in charge of those few sheep out there in the wilderness? I know your insolence and your

⁵ Page 6 above..

wicked heart; you have come to watch the battle.’” (1 Samuel 17:28-29)

Was Samuel the only human who knew David was anointed by the Lord to be king? If not, who did Samuel tell? . . . and when did he tell them? David was not even told at the time of his anointing. If the Lord made it known to David privately, that would have placed David in the position of proclaiming himself king. Not only was there no record of David doing such a thing, the question must be asked, “If he did, who would believe him? . . . and what would have to precede the pronouncement to cause others to accept it as the word of the Lord?” The final answer on that question must await the development of other issues.

King David noticed Bathsheba taking a bath while strolling on the palace roof and decided he wanted sex with her, even though he was told she was the wife of *Uriah the Hittite*. (2 Samuel 11:2-3) After David had intercourse with Bathsheba, he plied Uriah with food and drink, even as he planned to have him killed.

“ . . . David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. In the letter he wrote, ‘Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, that he may be struck down, and die.’” (2 Samuel 11:14-15)

David then took Bathsheba as a wife. Though David confessed his sin when confronted by the prophet Nathan and sought the Lord’s forgiveness, he offered no explanation for his action that mitigated his guilt in any way. (2 Samuel 12:1ff)

Later in his reign, David committed another grievous sin:

“Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to number Israel. So David said to Joab and the commanders of the army, ‘Go, number Israel, from Beersheba to Dan, and bring me a report, that I may know their number.’ But Joab said, ‘May the Lord add to his people a hundred times as many as they are! Are they not, my lord the king, all of them my lord’s servants? Why then should my lord require this? Why should he bring guilt upon Israel?’ But the king’s word prevailed against Joab. So Joab departed and went throughout all Israel, and came back to Jerusalem. And Joab gave the sum of the numbering of the people to David. In all Israel there were one million one hundred thousand men who drew the sword, and in Judah four hundred and seventy thousand who drew the sword. But he did not include Levi and Benjamin in the numbering, for the king’s command was abhorrent to Joab. But God was displeased with this thing, and he smote Israel. And David said to God, ‘I have sinned greatly in that I have done this thing. But now, I pray thee, take away the iniquity of thy servant; for I have done very foolishly.’ And the Lord spoke to Gad, David’s seer, saying, ‘Go and say to David, ‘Thus says the Lord, Three things I offer you; choose one of them, that I may do it to you.’ So Gad came to David and said to him, ‘Thus says the Lord, ‘Take which you will: either three years of famine; or three months of devastation by your foes, while the sword of your enemies overtakes you; or else three days of the sword of the Lord,, pestilence upon the land, and the angel of the Lord destroying throughout all the territory of Israel.’ Now decide what answer I shall return to him who sent me.’ Then David said to Gad, ‘I am in great distress; let me fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is very great; but let me not fall into the hand of man.’ So the Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel; and there fell seventy thousand men of Israel.” (1 Chronicles 21:1-14)

David then spoke directly to God:

“Was it not I who gave the command to number the people? It is I who have sinned and done very wickedly. But these sheep, what have they done? Let thy hand, I pray thee, O Lord my God, be against me and against my father’s

house; but let not the plague be upon thy people.” (1 Chronicles 21:17)

Once again David was clearly sorry for his sin, but once again he offered no reasonable explanation for his actions. In addition, Joab took immediate and clear exception to David's command, but to no avail. David was not punished but the Lord destroyed 70,000 men for his sin. Modern Christians and Jews alike took little notice of this incident, because it was very difficult for a modern person to understand how taking a census could be considered a sin at all, and why in the world would the Lord kill 70,000 for such an insignificant act. For those reasons that particular story of David had unique importance for opening a window of understanding to that ancient world. The most important thing to a soldier in David's army, to a soldier in the army of any ancient king or kingdom, and, indeed, in any culture in the history of the human race, was to believe that the king or culture for whom they offered to give their life was the carrier of absolute truth. In case of a king, and therefore in the case of David, that meant his soldiers must believe that he served god and that god was with him for them to aggressively respond to commands that would very likely result in their brutal death. Ancient kings, and David for certain, understood that fully. Such a king must demonstrate repeatedly that god was with him. Saul's supposed first sin at Gilboa exemplified that condition perfectly, for when Samuel failed to show-up as promised for the sacrifice Saul's troops began to scatter. In other words, they concluded god was not with Samuel and therefore they would not give their life to his service.

The king also had to risk his own life in battle, to prove his absolute conviction that he was directed by god. If the king was killed his troops knew their leader was not of god, and they were then easily defeated. Therefore, the death of Saul and his three sons at Gilboa was catastrophic for Israel. Since Israel had accepted that God was with Saul, there were only two possible outcomes from his death. Either Israel was wrong, or Saul had sinned. The sin was found in Saul's refusal to explicitly obey the direction of Samuel. Once it was determined that God was not with Saul because of his sin, Saul's remaining son, Ishbaal, was not allowed to succeed Saul as king.

Similarly, the loss of 70,000 people due to pestilence was viewed by the people of Israel as a serious expression of God's displeasure. There had to be accountability, and it had to come from David. That was so because Israel's insistence on having a king rule over them was driven by a deep yearning to have a leader who took responsibility for precisely the kind of natural or man made disaster represented by the pestilence. Israel had previously demonstrated that, as the *people of God*, they lacked the faith and character necessary to process the anxiety and guilt associated with such troubling events. In the case of the pestilence, the cause was found in David's sin for his insistence on a census. David understood the need to acknowledge the gravity of the situation, make a confession, and offer atonement. David responded appropriately to all three requirements. His atonement was a sacrifice to the Lord on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. That site was the hill where Solomon later built the temple at David's instigation. (1 Chronicles 21:16ff)

David's strength derived from his clear understanding of his obligations as a king, and the regular acting out of his relationship with the Lord in public settings. That included consultations with the Lord by use of the ephod (1 Samuel 23:9ff, 30:7ff, 2 Samuel 6:14), showing reverence for the ark (2 Samuel 6:02ff, 7:02ff & 15:24ff), consulting the Lord (1 Samuel 23:02, 2 Samuel 2:01, 5:19, 1 Chronicles 14:10), and confessing his sins. Though he effectively responded to his obligations as king, was he really the most important person in the history of Israel? . . . was he really the devout and humble servant of the Lord portrayed in his singing of psalms, or in his courageous stand against Goliath? . . . maybe not. There were two other accounts of battles with the Philistine giants from Gath, and Elhanan was said to, “. . . *slew Goliath the Gittite* (Gittite meant a person from Gath) . . .”. (2 Samuel 21:18-22 & 1 Chronicles 20:5-8) In addition, David managed to lay the blame for a three year famine on Saul, which led to the execution of a bunch of Saul's descendants. (2 Samuel 21:1ff) The real motive was no doubt a determination to insure they was no rival claim to the throne from the descendants of Saul. Most revealing, however, was the character weakness of extreme self-indulgence in David's sons. Ammon was so obsessed with having sex with Tamar, the beautiful sister of his brother Absalom, that he violated a very strong

taboo by raping her, and then afterward scorning her. (2 Samuel 13:1ff) David refused to say or do anything about Ammon's sin. Absalom was so obsessed with gaining revenge on Ammon that he schemed for two years before killing him. (2 Samuel 13:23ff) Then Absalom became so obsessed with his own self importance he rebelled against his father, bringing death on himself and many others. Solomon was named by David to succeed him as king, and though Solomon was very wise and built the temple, he was obsessed with a lust for women. He acquired, ". . . *seven hundred wives of royal rank, and three hundred concubines.*" (1 Kings 11:3) Reconsideration of David's lust for Bathsheba forced the conclusion that David himself was self-indulgent . . . so self-indulgent it was the dominant trait he passed on to his sons. If David was a devout, humble servant of the Lord, and exhibited that demeanor in his private life, at least one of his sons would have identified with that part of his personality. The legacy of David was neither holy or impressive. In the years just before the Babylonian Exile, Judah made a mockery of the institution of the monarchy by making kings out of 7 and 8 year old boys. Children were anointed king only so Judah would have someone to blame for failure and misery. The monarchy failed as an institution, however, the final assessment of the real importance of David in the Lord's plan of salvation rested with the prophets.

The Prophets

All of the prophets were called forth by the Lord, and given authority according to the model exemplified by Moses, and carried through the period of the Judges. That meant each prophet was called directly, without consultation with either king or common people, and each was given authority for a specific mission. Except for the case of Elijah passing his mantle to Elisha (2 Kings 2:1ff), prophets did not have the authority to name a successor. In the common parlance, a prophet was considered a person who revealed future events, and they were considered authoritative only when those future events occurred. But that definition was not satisfactory. The true understanding of the word came from two incidents portrayed in the New Testament. The first was Jesus' encounter with the women at the well in the Gospel of John. (John 4:7-30) Jesus asked her to give him a drink of water. She was surprised he would accept a drink of water from her because she was a lowly Samaritan. Eventually Jesus told her to:

" . . . go, call your husband, and come here. The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, 'I have no husband', for you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet.'" (John 4:16-19)

Likewise with the woman who entered the house of the Pharisee where Jesus had been invited to dine in the Gospel of Luke. She wet Jesus' feet with tears, wiped them away with her hair, and then kissed and anointed his feet. The host said to himself:

"If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." (Luke 7:37-39)

Jesus said nothing prior to the comment about his identity as a prophet in either story that could have been construed as a prediction of the future. What drew forth the declaration of prophet was his inspired discernment, and, in the second case, his apparent lack of inspired discernment. The same was true of all the prophets. They discerned the reality of the present circumstances of the people of God at such a deep level, that discernment had to have been inspired by the Lord. Because they understood the truth of the present, they understood the consequence for the people who failed to understand that deeper truth. When the consequence was communicated, it was in the form of a future development of the present reality. The proper response of the

recipient was a change of understanding, attitude and/or behavior in the present reality. If the prophet communicated successfully, future behavior, attitude and/or consequence would likewise change. However, because true prophets understood the reality around them at a much deeper level than others, they had a difficult task in expressing that reality in a way that could be understood by others. Therefore, they often resorted to colorful, poetic expression, and sometimes dramatic symbolism . . . for example:

“ . . . this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Thus the Lord said to me; ‘Make yourself thongs and yoke-bars, and put them on your neck.’ ” (Jeremiah 27:1-2)

Jeremiah wore the *yoke-bars and thongs* around Jerusalem and in the temple for a period of time. Obviously, the literal, objective aspect of *yoke-bars and thongs* was incidental to the intended meaning. The use of those “stage props” was consistent with the modern cliché; *a picture is worth a thousand words*. Symbolic expression such as stories, stage props, pictures and images was much more powerful and effective than conventional verbal discourse.

Since the primary task of the prophet was always the exposition of the truth of the present existential reality, understanding the purpose of the prophet first required identification of the audience to whom the message was directed, and then discernment of the change in understanding, attitude, behavior, and/or future consequence the Lord wanted to affect. It made no sense that a prophet was called to address an audience that was soon to be destroyed, because that meant the extraordinary call of the prophet, and power of the divine manifest therein, was simply wasted. And how would that have been any different than simply destroying those people through flood or famine? Conversely, it made perfect sense that the Lord called a prophet to proclaim the impending destruction of a king or people, and the reason for that destruction, as a means of affecting change in the target audience. The target audience was always the remnant, but who other than the Lord knew the actual identity of the remnant? The prophet spoke, but who really listened? Who received the messenger as one from God? . . . who pondered and then incorporated that revelation into their convictions? The prophet did not know, for a word properly spoken incubated for months, years, generations before it began to bear fruit. Yet there was a direct link between that remnant and the message of the prophet that was apparent in the history that followed.

Elijah

Elijah prophesied during the reign of Ahab, king of Israel, approximately 55 to 60 years after the split between Israel and Judah, and about 95 to 100 years after David. Elijah confronted Ahab without warning or introduction:

“As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.” (1 Kings 17:1)

He abruptly went into hiding *by the brook Cherith, that is east of the Jordan*. Elijah remained in hiding for over three years, during which time he was feed by ravens and performed miracles. When he returned, he again confronted Ahab, and demanded all Israel, and *“ . . . the 450 prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s⁶ table,”* (1 Kings 18:19) gather around him at the top of Mount Carmel.

“So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel, and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. And Elijah came near to all the people, and said, ‘How long will

⁶ *Ahab’s wife and a worshiper of Baal.*

you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.’ And the people did not answer him a word. The Elijah said to the people, ‘I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord; but Baal’s prophets are four hundred fifty men. Let two bulls be given to us; and let them choose one bull for themselves, and cut it into pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; and I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, and put no fire to it. And you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the Lord; and the God who answers by fire, he is God.’ And all the people answered, ‘It is well spoken.’ Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, ‘Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; and call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it.’ And they took the bull which was given them, and they prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, ‘O Baal, answer us!’ But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped about the altar which they had made. And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, ‘Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is musing, or he has gone aside, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.’ And they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice; not one answered, no one heeded. Then Elijah said to all the people, ‘Come near to me’; and all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down; Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, ‘Israel shall be your name’; and the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two measures of seed. And he put the wood in order, and cut the bull in pieces and laid in on the wood. And he said, ‘Fill your jars with water, and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood.’ And he said, ‘Do it a second time’; and they did it a second time. And he said, ‘Do it a third time’; and they did it a third time. And the water ran round about the altar, and filled the trench also with water. And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, ‘O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that thou, O Lord, art God, and that thou hast turned their hearts back.’ Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, ‘The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God.’ And Elijah said to them, ‘Seize the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape.’ And they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and killed them there.” (1 Kings 18:20-40)

The event on Mount Carmel constituted the entire purpose of Elijah. The drought and the period in hiding had served to draw attention to Elijah and guaranteed the people and the false prophets could be assembled when directed. The Lord God acted through Elijah on Mount Carmel in the same manner he had acted through Moses during Moses’ confrontation with Pharaoh.⁷ Elijah and Moses were the only two before Christ who understood “spiritual warfare,” and understood it was the only warfare capable of destroying a “false god.” Elijah was able to easily kill the entire 450 false prophets of Baal, because any person who came under the conviction that their “god,” or their “absolute truth,” was false, wanted to die . . . “*And in those days men will seek death and will not find it; they will long to die, and death will fly from them.*” (Revelation 9:6)

The action of Elijah did not affirm the authority of the monarchy, but rather stripped Ahab and

⁷ Page 2 of this manuscript.

the monarchy of any visage of divine authority. Indeed, Elijah subsequently decreed the slaughter of the entire house of Ahab, including all of his male descendants. (1 Kings 21:17ff) The order was later carried out by Jehu. (2 Kings 9:1ff) The slaughter of the entire house of a king, and all of his male descendants, had always been an action intended to guarantee there would never be another legitimate claim to the position or authority of king arising by way of the preceding custom. So it was with Israel.

It was Elijah's purpose to prepare Israel for the diaspora with a transcendent manifestation of the truth and power of God. His period in hiding was a model of Israel's coming experience in the diaspora. The miraculous provision by Ravens was a reconfirmation of God's commitment to miraculous provision for his people as previously experienced in the Exodus. And Elijah did not die, but was taken up into heaven so that Israel would know that it too would survive the diaspora. Israel was indeed carried off into the wilderness:

“Then the king of Assyria invaded all the land and came to Samaria, and for three years he besieged it. In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria captured Samaria, and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria, and placed them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.” (2 Kings 17:5-6)

Israel survived for centuries in the diaspora and maintained its identity and core values. That was a miraculous consequence because humans were created to need God, and without a viable relationship with God, that need caused humans to seek fulfillment through human affirmation. The resultant acquiescence to peer approval led to the appropriation of the values of the dominant peer group. Israel maintained a strong enough relationship with their God during the period of the diaspora to prevent that amalgamation of values. The Lord intended for Israel to survive, and to preserve its faith in the diaspora because the social organization preserved therein was much closer to the covenant at Sinai than the monarchy, and was much more effective in spreading knowledge of God throughout the human race.

Isaiah

The prophetic ministry of Isaiah began near end of the reign of Uzziah, king of Judah, approximately 130 to 135 years after Elijah, 225 to 235 years after David, and 20 years before the fall of Samaria to the Assyrians. More than any other prophet, and more than even Moses, Isaiah understood the Lord's desire for Israel.

*“It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the
Lord
shall be established as the highest of the
mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,
and many people shall come,
and say;
‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the
Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways and that we
may walk in his paths.’*

*For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and
the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations, and
shall decide for many peoples;
and they shall beat their swords into
plowshares.
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against
nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.”*
(Isaiah 2:2-4)

*“For I know their works and their thoughts, and I am coming to gather all
nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory, and I will
set a sign among them. And from them I will send survivors to the nations, to
Tarshish, Put, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the
coastlands afar off, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory; and they
shall declare my glory among the nations.”* (Isaiah 66:18-19)

The Lord, nevertheless, made it quite clear he found the Israel of Isaiah’s day stupid:

*“The ox knows its owner,
and the ass its master’s crib;
but Israel does not know,
my people does not understand.”*
(Isaiah 1:3)

and their religious rituals repugnant:

*“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says
the Lord;
I have had enough of burnt offerings or rams and the
fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or
of he-goats.
‘When you come to appear before me, who requires
of you this trampling of my courts?
Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an
abomination to me.
New moon and sabbath and the calling of assemblies-
I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.
Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul
hates;
they have become a burden to me, I am weary of
bearing them.
When you spread forth 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.
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,
correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for
the widow.” (Isaiah 1:11-17)*

The formation of the Hebrews into *the people of God* in the Exodus was never intended to create a nation like other nations. The Lord never desired to create a people that were separate and self-contained, and preserved their property and identity with the sword. Israel was to be a beacon which radiated out to humanity the glory and goodness of God so powerfully that other nations would lay down their weapons, and come to the mountain of Israel to glorify God. But Israel took control of its own destiny with the monarchy and that political initiative only led to self-destruction. Yet the Lord planned a restoration, not of the monarchy, but of the covenant that existed before the monarchy . . . the covenant of Sinai, “. . . *Israel is my first born son.*” (Exodus 4:22) That meant God would be restored as king over Israel. How was that restoration to be affected? . . . and how would Israel understand that their king was once again God?

*“. . . 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.”*

(Isaiah 1:26)

*“For to us a child is born, and to us a son is given;
and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his
name will be called
‘Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.’
Of the increase of his government and of peace there
will be no end,
upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to
establish it, and to uphold
it with justice and with righteousness from this time
forth and for evermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.”*

(Isaiah 9:6-7)

*“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of
Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide the equity for the meek of the earth;
and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked.*

*Righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist,
and faithfulness the girdle of his loins.”*

(Isaiah 11:1-5)

*“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then shall the lame man leap like a hart,
and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.”*

(Isaiah 35:5-7)

*“. . . so shall he startle many nations;
kings shall shut their mouths because of him;
for that which has not been told them they shall see,
and that which they have not heard
they shall understand.”*

(Isaiah 52:15)

*“He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not . . .
but he was wounded for our transgressions.”*

(Isaiah 53:3-5)

Isaiah faithfully set forth the vision of a transcendent God for his people, and the attributes that would identify him when he once again assumed the role of king over his people. It was, however, a transcendent vision, and therefore contained little information on when it would happen, nor did it set forth a path of individual or collective initiative that would contribute to the realization of the vision. Isaiah's admonition to the remnant was patience:

*“Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;
but they that 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.”*

(Isaiah 40:30-31)

The message of Jeremiah had to be combined with Isaiah to provide the remnant a way forward.

Jeremiah

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, son of Hilkiah the high priest,⁸ in the thirteenth year of Josiah, king of Judah, whose reign had begun about 640 BC. That meant Jeremiah's call came about 110 to 120 years after Isaiah, 240 to 255 years after Elijah, and 335 to 355 years after David. The period of his prophetic ministry continued through the beginning of the *Babylonian Exile* in 587 BC.

Since Josiah became king over Judah when he was 8 years old⁹, Jeremiah's father functioned as the actual head of state during Josiah's minority years, just as the priest Jehoiada had previously done during the reign of Jehoash.¹⁰ But the most important bond between Josiah and Jeremiah was Jeremiah's youth. "*Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.*" (Jeremiah 1:6) That word from the Lord came to Jeremiah when Josiah was twenty-one years of age, and Jeremiah mirrored Josiah's tenure as a "child king." In any case, five years after the word first came to Jeremiah a major attempt at religious reform was initiated.¹¹ It began when Hilkiah found *the Book of the Law in the house of the Lord.* (2 Kings 22:8) Upon hearing the contents of the book Josiah issued the following order to Hilkiah:

"Go, inquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Judah concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us."
(2 Kings 22:13)

Hilkiah, along with several others, consulted the prophetess Huldah who confirmed that Lord was set to pour out his wrath on Judah, but relented because of Josiah's humble repentance.¹² The subsequent reforms initiated by Josiah included a solemn reading of the entire contents of the newly discovered book at the temple in the presence of all of people of Jerusalem, and of commitment of allegiance to the covenant as written in that book, a cleansing of all of Judah and Israel of any expression of interest in, or solicitation of, foreign or false gods, and a huge celebration of the Passover. Thereafter Josiah's reign continued without major incident for 13 years.

The word from Jeremiah that set in motion the reforms of Josiah were expressed in Chapters 2:1 through 6:30. The principal theme of that word was an impending invasion from the north. Within that theme there were four areas of focus. The first was a remembrance of the Exodus and the covenant:

"Thus says the Lord, I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown. Israel was holy to the Lord, the first fruits of his harvest . . . What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthlessness, and became worthless?" (Jeremiah 2:2-5)

⁸ Jeremiah 1:1, 2 Kings 22:4, and 2 Chronicles 34:14.

⁹ 2 Kings 22:1

¹⁰ 2 Kings 11:1ff

¹¹ 2 Kings 22:1 through 23:27 and 2 Chronicles 34:3 through 35:25.

¹² 2 Kings 22:11-20

then a mockery of Judah's current religious practice;

" . . . their kings, their princes, their priests, and their prophets, who say to a tree, 'You are my father,' and to a stone, 'You gave me birth.' For they have turned their back to me, and not their face. But in the time of their trouble they say, 'Arise and save us!' But where are your gods that you made for yourself? Let them arise, if they can save you . . ." (Jeremiah 2:25-28)

a plea for reform;

"If you return, O Israel, says the Lord, to me you should return. If you remove your abominations from my presence, and do not waver, and if you swear, 'As the Lord lives,' in truth, in justice, and in uprightness, then nations shall bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory." (Jeremiah 4:1-2)

and finally a threat of destruction emanating;

"Flee for safety, O people of Benjamin, from the midst of Jerusalem! Blow the trumpet in Teko'a, and raise a signal on Beth-hacche'rem; for evil looms out of the north, and great destruction (Jeremiah 6:1) . . . Hew down her trees; cast up a siege mound against Jerusalem. This is the city which must be punished; there is nothing but oppression within her." (Jeremiah 6:6)

The *book of the Law* discovered by Hilkiah in the Temple, and used by Josiah as the basis for reform, was Deuteronomy. That was so because Deuteronomy specifically addressed the areas of focus in Jeremiah's word, and used language common in his day but unknown during the Exodus.

1. First and foremost, Deuteronomy was a reaffirmation of the Exodus and the Covenant, and relied completely on the authority of Moses.
2. Deuteronomy was almost entirely a book of instruction, either from Moses, or directly from the Lord, on the conduct and customs expected in Israel.
3. Israel was repeatedly promised prosperity and favor for complying with the Lord's wishes:
 - a. *"Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which I command you this day, that it may go well with you, and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which the Lord your God gives you for ever."* (Deuteronomy 4:40)
 - b. *"Oh that they had such a mind as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their children for ever!"* (Deuteronomy 5:29)
 - c. *"And because you hearken to these ordinances, and keep and do them, the Lord your God will keep with you the covenant and the steadfast love which he swore to your fathers to keep; he will love you, bless you, and multiply you; he will also bless the fruit of your body and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the young of your flock, in the land which he swore to your fathers to give you. You shall be blessed above all peoples; there shall not be male or female barren among you, or among your cattle. And the Lord will take away from you all sickness; and none of the evil diseases of Egypt, which you knew, will he inflict upon you, but he will lay them upon all who hate you."* (Deuteronomy 7:12-15)
 - d. *"And if you obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments which I command you this day, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the Lord your God. Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed*

shall be the fruit of your body, and the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your beasts, the increase of your cattle, and the young of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading-trough. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you; they shall come out against you one way, and flee before you seven ways. The Lord will command the blessing upon you in your barns, and all that you undertake; and he will bless you in the land which the Lord your God gives you. The Lord will establish you as a people holy to himself, as he has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God, and walk in his ways.” (Deuteronomy 28:1-13)

4. Likewise, Deuteronomy threatened Israel with destruction for apostasy. The possible curses directly followed the possible blessings, and continued from verses 28:15 to 28:68:
 - a. *“But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God of be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you this day, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading-trough. Cursed shall be the fruit of your body, and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your cattle, and the young of your flock. Cursed shall you be when you come it, and cursed shall you be when you go out. The Lord will send upon you curses, confusion, and frustration, in all that you undertake to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly, on account of the evil of your doings because you have forsaken me . . . The Lord will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flies, a nation whose language you do not understand, a nation of stern countenance, who shall not regard the person of the old or show favor to the young, and shall eat the offspring of your cattle and the fruit of your ground, until you are destroyed . . . until they have caused you to perish¹³. . . . In the morning you shall say, ‘Would it were evening!’ and at evening you shall say, ‘Would it were morning!’ because of the dread which your heart shall fear, and the sights which your eyes shall see. And the Lord will bring you back in ships to Egypt, a journey which I promised that you should never make again; and there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but no man will buy you.”*

In addition to Deuteronomy’s demonstrated intent to address the issues raised by the prophetic word of Jeremiah, there were several other aspects of Deuteronomy that clearly established it could not have been written by Moses, and had to have been the product of a much later period. The first of those issues was the problem of other gods. The subject was broached seventeen times in Deuteronomy and seventeen times in Jeremiah in the form of a direct communication to the people of Israel of the Lord’s disgust for their acting-out of religious practices of other cultures, in honor of other gods. The subject of other gods was addressed in 1 & 2 Kings and in 2 Chronicles, but most often in the context of an evaluation of the king’s performance, and seldom as a direct communication to the people. And the problem was rarely mentioned in Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, Judges, or during the reign of David. The social condition necessary for the blending and confusion of religious practice was coexistence. During war a sharp differential in custom and behavior was essential so an enemy could first be denigrated, then rendered less human in order to relieve the guilt of killing. There was a state of coexistence in Judah at the time of Jeremiah with several smaller cultures that posed no military threat to Judah. The differences between Israel prior to crossing the Jordan, and the people beyond the Jordan was dramatic and unknown. There was, therefore, little possibility

¹³ This could only have referred to Assyria or Babylon. Israel entered the promised land and thrived during a period when Egypt was weakened and no significant culture existed in Mesopotamia. That condition only changed with the rise of Assyria.

of meaningful person to person communication. Some military or political communication, however, was possible between leaders. The charge from the Lord given to the people through Moses was to take possession of the land. In order to succeed as the aggressor, Israel had to see itself as totally superior to the cultures it intended to destroy. Therefore, Moses could not have written Deuteronomy. Indeed, other gods did not become a problem for Israel until the reign of Solomon who had, *seven hundred wives, princesses . . . went after Astarte, the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom, the abomination of the Ammonites. . . and built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab . . .* (1 Kings 11:3-6)

Deuteronomy set down detailed instructions regarding tithing. Not once but twice.

(Deuteronomy 14:22ff & 26:1ff) In the first instance it stated: *“You shall tithe all the yield of your seed, which comes forth from the field year by year. And before the Lord your God, in the place which he will choose, to make his name dwell there, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, of your wine, and of your oil . . .”* During the period of the Patriarchs, Israel had been a nomadic people. In Egypt they made bricks. (Exodus 5:07ff) During the forty years in the desert they had no land and grew no crops. In the case of wine, the vines required four to five years before they produced a harvest, and another year before the wine was ready to drink. In the case of oil, olive trees required a longer period of time before they produced a crop. Furthermore, the change from a nomadic people to an agricultural people would have been difficult, and would have taken considerable time, hence there can be little doubt the initial source of a livelihood was sheep to which was later added cattle and then agriculture. The notion that Moses was merely providing instruction about a reality in the distant future had to be rejected because indirect instruction regarding an unknown life style would not have made any sense to the nomadic Israelites. In truth, the concept of tithing was introduced by the Lord when Israel expressed a desire for a king like other people. (1 Samuel 8:4ff) The Lord stated that, in requesting a king, Israel was rejecting him. He then instructed Samuel to grant them their wish but first tell them of the grave disadvantages of a king. In the list of negative consequences of a king were: *“He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants . . . he will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves.”* (8:14-17) The instructions in Deuteronomy regarding the tithe were entirely foreign to the culture of Israel before it crossed the Jordan, but entirely consistent with the Israel of Jeremiah’s era.

Deuteronomy set forth detailed procedures for preparation for battle against a large army: *“When you go forth to war against your enemies, and see horses and chariots and an army larger than your own, you shall not be afraid . . .”* (Deuteronomy 20:1ff) The preparation included the following instructions:

“What man is there that has built a new house and not dedicated it? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man dedicate it. And what man is there that has planted a vineyard and has not enjoyed its fruit? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man enjoy its fruit. And what man is there that has betrothed a wife and has not taken her? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man take her . . . What man is there that is fearful and faint hearted? Let him go back to his house, lest the heart of his fellows melt as his heart.” (20:5-8)

Such instructions would have been absurd to a nomadic people about to take possession of a promised land. The language clearly presumed a settled Israel within which some soldiers had vineyards and homes. In more modern cultures those men who have to be concerned about their family and farm were typically called “militia.” The American Revolutionary Army used militia and they were considered a “second class” army that could not always be counted on to hold their position. But that possibility dictated how the militia was used, and did not necessitate their dismissal. In the case of a nomadic army that was the aggressor it would have been far more likely the “faint hearted” would have been positioned at the front to draw the enemy into a trap, or create the opportunity for a counter offensive. If Moses had the temerity

to insist such instructions addressed a future life style with which they were not familiar, his teaching would have met with derision and a loss of stature.

After the word given to Jeremiah in the thirteenth year of Josiah, there was a break in Jeremiah's ministry. The break was implied in Jeremiah 1:2ff:

“ . . . to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of Jehoiakim . . . ”

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah in the 13th year of Josiah's reign, and he dutifully spoke that word to the people of Israel (Jeremiah 2:1-6:30). Josiah introduced Deuteronomy and initiated reform in the 18th year of his reign. The word spoken by Jeremiah had been heard by at least Hilkiah and Josiah, and no threat from Babylon developed during the remaining thirteen years of Josiah's reign. Jeremiah had every reason to believe his ministry had ended in success. That was to change. Josiah's life ended abruptly, and unnecessarily, at the age of 39:

“ . . . Neco king of Egypt went up to fight at Carchemish on the Euphrates and Josiah went out against him. But he [Neco] sent envoys to him, saying, ‘What have we to do with each other, king of Judah? I am not coming against you this day, but against the house with which I am at war; and God has commanded me to make haste. Cease opposing God, who is with me, lest he destroy you.’ Nevertheless Josiah would not turn away from him, but disguised himself in order to fight with him. He did not listen to the words of Neco from the mouth of God, but joined battle in the plan of Megiddo. And the archers shot King Josiah; and the king said to his servants, ‘Take me away, for I am badly wounded.’ So his servants took him out of the chariot and carried him in his second chariot and brought him to Jerusalem. And he died . . . ” (2 Chronicles 35:20-24)

The death of a king in battle was always a serious problem for any ancient culture, because it forced the conclusion that god was not with that king. The incident was especially galling for Judah because they were not at war with Egypt. Egypt was at war with Assyria¹⁴ and Assyria was no friend to Judah. To make the matter worse, Neco disposed Jehoahaz, Josiah's son and successor, took him to Egypt, appointed his brother Eliakim king, renamed him Jehoiakim, and extracted a large tribute from Judah.¹⁵ Neco also claimed God was with him, and since he was victorious his claim was not easily discounted. Josiah was buried with honor. Jeremiah even uttered a lament for Josiah,¹⁶ but the scorn of Judah turned on Jeremiah. The word he spoke 18 years before warned of a disastrous invasion from the north. No threat from the north materialized, and the threat that did lead to the death of Josiah was from the south. Jeremiah had said nothing of such a threat. The word from Jeremiah had promised:

“If you wish to come back, Israel - it is Yahweh who speaks - it is to me you must return. Do away with your abominations and you will have no need to avoid me. If you swear, ‘As Yahwe lives!’ truthfully, justly, honestly, the nations will bless themselves by you, and glory in you.” (Jeremiah 4:1-2 - Jerusalem)

¹⁴ 2 Kings 23:29.

¹⁵ 2 Chronicles 35:26

¹⁶ 2 Chronicles 35:25

The abominations had been removed during Josiah's reforms, and the largest Passover since the time of Samuel had been celebrated, yet during the time from those reforms to the death of Josiah there was no evidence nations blessed themselves in Israel, or in the Lord, or saw glory in him.

Hilkiah, the high priest, had "found" Deuteronomy in the temple and taken it to Josiah, and then implemented all the reforms directed by Josiah. He was also Jeremiah's father, and therefore very closely, perhaps too closely, identified with Jeremiah. The temple, the priesthood, Hilkiah, and therefore the men of Anathoth, were certainly diminished by their association with Jeremiah, and they were furious: ". . . *the men of Anathoth who are determined to kill me and have warned me, 'Do not prophesy in the name of Yahweh or you will die at our hands!'*" (Jeremiah 11:21- Jerusalem Bible)

Jeremiah grieved deeply before the Lord:

"Realize that I suffer insult for your sake. When your words came, I devoured them; your word was my delight and the joy of my heart; for I was called by your name, Yahweh, God of Sabaoth. I never took pleasure in sitting in scoffers' company; with your hand on me I held myself aloof, since you had filled me with indignation. Why is my suffering continual, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?" (Jeremiah 15:15-18 - Jerusalem Bible)

And the Lord responded to Jeremiah's despair:

"I will take you back into my service; and if you utter noble, not despicable, thoughts, you shall be as my own mouth. They will come back to you, but you must not go back to them. I will make you a bronze wall fortified against this people. They will fight against you but they will not overcome you, because I am with you to save you and to deliver - it is Yahweh who speaks. I mean to deliver you from the hands of the wicked and redeem you from the clutches of the violent." (Jeremiah 15:19-21- Jerusalem Bible)

And thus began a deeply intimate and transparent relationship between the Lord and Jeremiah. Jeremiah became "as the Lord's own mouth," and the Lord shared with Jeremiah from his heart.

- The Lord complained to Jeremiah:
 - *"Cannot you see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children collect the wood, the fathers light the fire, the women knead the dough, to make cakes for the Queen of Heaven; and, to spite me, they pour libations to alien gods."* (7:17-18)
- The Lord acted perplexed:
 - *"Is it really me they spite - it is Yahweh who speaks - is not in fact themselves, to their own confusion?"* (7:19)
- Expressed anger:
 - *"My anger and my wrath shall be poured out on this place, over man and beast, trees of the countryside, fruits of the soil; it shall burn, and not quenched."* (7:20)

¹⁷ The Jerusalem Bible will be used for citations regarding the communication between the Lord and Jeremiah because it does a much better job of capturing the emotion, and the depth, of that communication.

- Recounted past experience with Israel:
 - *“For when I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I said nothing to them, gave them no orders, about holocaust and sacrifice. These were my orders, ‘Listen to my voice, then I will be your God and you shall be my people.” (7:22-23)*
- Vented rage:
 - *“...Yahweh has rejected, has abandoned, a brood that he detests.” (7:29)*
- Cried:
 - *“Tears flood my eyes night and day, unceasingly . . .” (14:17)*
- Defended his attitude:
 - *“Even if Moses and Samuel were standing in my presence I could not warm to this people!” (15:1)*

Jeremiah responded to the Lord with an equivalent range and depth of emotion.

- He offered a different perspective:
 - *“Well you know, Yahweh, the course of man is not in his control, nor is it in man’s power as he goes his way to guide his steps. Correct us, Yahweh, gently, not in your anger or you will reduce us to nothing.” (10:23)*
- Expressed anxiety:
 - *“Yahweh, that was when you opened my eyes to their scheming . . . I for my part was like a trustful lamb being led to the slaughter house, not knowing the schemes they were plotting against me . . . let me see the vengeance you will take on them, for I have committed my cause to you.” (11:8-20)*
- Debated with the Lord:
 - *“... I would like to debate a point of justice with you. Why is it that the wicked live so prosperously? Why do scoundrels enjoy peace?” (12:1)*
- Defended himself:
 - *“... have I not done my best to serve you, interceded with you for my enemy in the time of his disaster, his distress? You know I have!” (15:11)*
- Complained bitterly:
 - *“You have seduced me, Yahweh, and I have let myself be seduced; you have overpowered me; you were the stronger. I am a daily laughing stock . . .” (20:7)*
- Expressed despair:
 - *“My heart is broken within me, I tremble in all my bones, I am like a drunken man, a man overcome with wine . . .” (23:9)*
- And gradually developed poise and courage:
 - *“Yahweh himself sent me to say all the things you have heard against this Temple and this city. So now amend your behavior and actions, listen to the voice of Yahweh your God: if you do, he will relent and not bring down on you the disaster he has pronounced against you. For myself, I am as you see in your hands. Do whatever you please or think right with me. But be sure of this, that if you put me to death, you will be bringing innocent blood on yourselves, on this city and on its citizens, since Yahweh has truly sent me to you to*

say all these words in your hearing.” (26:12-15)

The Lord was intent on forcing a dramatic change in the customs and institutions of Israel and would not relent. All of the prophets which had preceded Jeremiah had participated in the preparation of Israel for that change. Elijah had prepared the Northern Kingdom for life in the diaspora. Isaiah had set forth the framework of the Lord’s restored kingdom, and made it clear he would be the king he had been before the emergence of the monarchy. Jeremiah supplied, and lived out, a critically important attribute of that restored kingdom:

“ . . . this is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel when those days arrive - it is Yahweh who speaks. Deep within them I will plant my Law, writing it on their hearts. Then I will be their God and they shall be my people. There will be no further need for neighbor to try to teach neighbor, or brother to say to brother, ‘Learn to know Yahweh!’ No, they will all know me, the least no less than the greatest - it is Yahweh who speaks - since I will forgive their iniquity and never call their sins to mind.” (Jeremiah 31:33-34 - Jerusalem Bible)

Though Israel had been established as the “*Lord’s first born*” in the Exodus, and thereby became the “*people of God*” without human king or human institution between God and his people, there was no understanding until Jeremiah of how that revelation could function at a deeply personal level. Without deep personal meaning in was inevitable that a king, priest or institution would position itself between God and his people. Which is why the Lord systematically destroyed those institutions and kingdoms.

In addition, Jeremiah’s impassioned ministry and capacity to survive persecution gave the remnant of Israel the strength and vision to survive the Exile and retain their faith.

The third contribution of Jeremiah’s ministry was the important lesson in religious reform that played out during the reign of Josiah. It was the word given by the Lord in Jeremiah’s youth¹⁸ that first gave rise to the Book of Deuteronomy and then to the reforms of Josiah. Hilkiah and Josiah very likely meant well, but neither consulted Jeremiah, nor did they ask Jeremiah to query the Lord regarding their intentions. Furthermore, the author or authors of Deuteronomy did not understand, or chose to ignore, the messages of Elijah, Isaiah, other prophets, and the history of Samuel. Consequently, both Deuteronomy and the reforms of Josiah were out of step with the Lord’s plan. Implementation of reform occurred only in the 18th year of Josiah reign. Thereafter, reform was not mentioned. There was no invasion from the north during remaining 13 years of Josiah’s reign. That may have been interpreted as a sign of God’s favor, but Josiah’s death, and Pharaoh Neco’s kidnap of Josiah’s son and levy of 100 talents of silver and 10 talents of gold on Judah was certainly understood to have been an expression of the Lord’s displeasure. Why indeed, did Josiah go into battle against Neco? . . . especially since the battle occurred at the river Euphrates¹⁹ which was far from Judah? There was no indication elsewhere in the history of that period that Josiah was prone to reckless, impulsive actions. It was true of all ancient kings and leaders that they led their army into battle in order to prove to their army their own conviction that god was with the king, and that inspired the troops as long as that king lived. Conversely, the death of the king proved god was not with him. Whatever might have been Josiah’s motivation, he certainly proved he did not have the Lord’s protection.

Whereas the word given to Jeremiah in the 13th year of Josiah’s reign showed the Lord wanted to reason with Judah:

¹⁸ Jeremiah 2:1 through 6:30.

¹⁹ 2 Kings 23:29.

“What shortcoming did your fathers find in me that led them to desert me?”
(2:5)

“The priests have never asked, ‘Where is Yahweh?’ Those who administer the Law have no knowledge of me. The shepherds have rebelled against me; the prophets have prophesied in the name of Baal, following things with no power in them . . . Does a nation change its gods? - and these are not gods at all! Yet my people have exchanged their Glory for what has no power in it. You heavens, stand aghast at this, stand stupefied, stand utterly appalled . . .” (2:8-12)

“Have you no fear of me? . . . will you not tremble at my presence . . .” (5:21-22)
“Your crimes have made all this go wrong, your sins have deprived you of these favors.” (5:25)

“Yahweh says this: Put yourselves on the ways of long ago, inquire about the ancient paths: which was the good way? Take it then, and you shall find rest.”
(6:16)

The word given Jeremiah during the reign of Jehoiakim after the death of Josiah was harsh:

“Cut off your tresses, throw them down. On the bare heights raise a dirge, For Yahweh has rejected, has abandoned, a brood that he detests. Yes, the sons of Judah have done what displeases me - it is Yahweh who speaks. They have put their abominations in the Temple that bears my name, to defile it; they have built the high place of Topheth in the Valley of Ben-hinnom, to burn their sons and daughters; a thing I never commanded, a thing that never entered my thoughts. So now the days are coming - it is Yahweh who speaks - when people will no longer talk of Topheth or of the Valley of Ben-hinnom, but of the Valley of Slaughter. Topheth will become a burial ground, for lack of other space; the corpses of this people will feed the birds of heaven and the beasts of the earth . . .” (7:29-33)

The people of Judah had resorted to child sacrifice²⁰ out of a desperation that was the result of alienation from the living God. The plight of the people had grown more desperate during the reign of Josiah, not less, because Hilkiah and Josiah had done the very thing the Lord had complained about in his first word to Jeremiah: *“The priests have never asked, ‘Where is Yahweh?’ Those who administer the Law have no knowledge of me.”*

The lesson of Deuteronomic Reform was meant to stand for all time as an object lesson that reform, revival, and restoration only war against the Lord’s real purposes if driven by human authority and a human desire to strengthen, or expand the externalities of religious practice. Yet, it was precisely the failure of Josiah’s reforms that drove Jeremiah into a deep, transparent relationship with God. The pressure had to have been intense enough on Jeremiah to force him into a full and honest expression of his feelings in the presence of the Lord. Only then was Jeremiah able to experience for himself, and for the human race, a God wanting to be life giving, capable of crying, wondering, being perplexed, and finally venting rage.

Exile and Return

Babylon’s grand political strategy was indicated by its initial invasion of Judah during the

²⁰ Refer to [Child Sacrifice from Abraham to Abortion](#) on this website.

reign of Jehoiakim:

“During his time Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon invaded, and Jehoiakim became his vassal for three years, but then rebelled against him a second time. So he sent armed bands of Chaldeans, Aramaeans, Moabites, and Ammonites against him . . .” (2 Kings 24:1-2, Jerusalem Bible)

Nebuchadnezzar used an army composed of Chaldeans, Aramaeans, Moabites, and Ammonites to subdue Judah. All of those countries had previously been independent people and waged war and made peace according to their own interests. That they could be trusted to wage war together against Judah, in the sole interests of Babylon, indicated a substantial reordering of values and allegiances. How was that reordering affected? Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiakim, “. . . his mother, and his servants, and his princes, and his palace officials . . . all the treasure of the House of the Lord . . . all the mighty men of valor, ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and smiths . . .”²¹ into exile in Babylon. In short, the ruling class was taken into exile, the common people were left in Jerusalem. The exile was set for a period of 70 years. Consequently no one who was raised as a child according to the customs and beliefs of Israel lived to return from exile. Furthermore, the Lord instructed Jeremiah to send the exiles a letter:

“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” (Jeremiah 29:4-7)

The intent of Babylon was formation of the second and third generation of exiles with the values of Babylon such that Babylon would have their principal loyalty and service. Certainly that goal had been accomplished with the Chaldeans, Aramaeans, Moabites, and Ammonites. In addition to assisting in regional military security, returning exiles were expected to establish and maintain a steady flow of tax revenue back to Babylon.

Regardless of the intentions of Babylon the Lord had his own reasons for sending Israel into exile. It had already been shown how Elijah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah were used to prepare Israel for the end of the monarchy and reestablishment of God as king over his people. The exile, as a singular event, certainly caused the abrupt and permanent end of the monarchy, but much additional work was necessary to achieve the Lord’s purposes.

Ezekiel

The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel, the priest, on the fifth day of the month, in the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin²² in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar. Almost immediately the Lord assigned Ezekiel a very heavy responsibility:

“Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; whenever

²¹ 2 Kings 24:12-14.

²² Ezekiel 1:2

you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you will have saved your life. Again, if a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die; because you have not warned him, he shall die for his sin, and his righteous deeds which he has done shall not be remembered; but his blood I will require at your hand. Nevertheless, if you warn the righteous man not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live, because he took warning; and you will have saved your life."
(Ezekiel 3:16-21)

The word from the Lord penetrated right to the heart of Israel's desire to be ruled by a king. They had not wanted to be accountable to the Lord . . . better to tolerate self-indulgence and moral corruption. And once the monarchy was established it was very easy to say, "he (king) will never listen to me." The situation had gotten so bad in the last years of Judah that seven and eight year old boys were made king, and though the affairs of state were clearly managed by priests, who believed themselves righteous and knowledgeable of the Lord, the "king" was still blamed for negative developments. The custom tainted all of Israel's social intercourse, and the Lord was determined it would end. The assault on that rotten core continued:

"And the word of the Lord came to me: 'Son of man, when a land sins against me by acting faithlessly, and I stretch out my hand against it, and break its staff of bread and send famine upon it, and cut off from it man and beast, even if these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they would deliver but their own lives by their righteousness, says the Lord God. If I cause wild beasts to pass through the land, and they ravage it, and it be made desolate, so that no man may pass through because of the beasts; even if these three men were in it, as I live, says the Lord God, they would deliver neither sons nor daughters; they alone would be delivered, but the land would be desolate. Or if I bring a sword upon that land, and say, Let a sword go through the land; and I cut off from it man and beast; though these three men were in it, as I live, says the Lord God, they would deliver neither sons nor daughters, but they alone would be delivered. Or if I sent a pestilence into that land, and pour out my wrath upon it with blood, to cut off from it man and beast; even if Noah, Daniel, and Job were in it, as I live, says the Lord God, they would deliver neither son nor daughter; they would deliver but their own lives by their righteousness.'" (Ezekiel 14:12-20)

That word from the Lord was notable because none of the traditional heroes of Israel were mentioned. Not Abraham, not Jacob, not Moses, not David²³, and none of the previous prophets. Noah, Daniel, and Job were heroes of the new order in that they responded to adversity with a uniquely individual faith in the Lord, without inheritance, or the support of king, priest, temple, or military. In rejecting the moral concept that one holy man could save many, the Lord was rejecting the concept that Israel could be saved by Abraham, Jacob, Moses, or David. Those traditional heroes could no longer save anyone but themselves. Which meant the Lord no longer intended to listen to the likes of Abraham when he bargained with the Lord to spare Sodom and Gomorrah:

"Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is

²³ Abraham was mentioned briefly in 33:24 and then David in 34:23 & 37:24.

very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry which has come to me; and if not, I will know.” So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom; but Abraham still stood before the Lord. Then Abraham drew near, and said, ‘Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt thou then destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? . . . And the Lord said, ‘If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake.’” (Genesis 18:20-26)

Abraham bargained until the Lord agreed to spare the city for ten righteous men. Apparently there were not ten righteous men in Sodom and Gomorrah because the cities were subsequently destroyed. Not only did the word spoken through Ezekiel declare that the Lord would never again spare even son or daughter for the sake of one righteous man, he carried the change in moral ethic even further:

“But if a wicked man turns away from all his sins which he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness which he has done he shall live . . . But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity and does the same abominable things that the wicked man does, shall he live? None of the righteous deeds which he has done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which he is guilty and the sin he has committed, he shall die.” (Ezekiel 18:20-24)

That meant the strong faith of King David’s youth would no longer count for anything with the Lord after David arranged the murder of Uriah so that he could have sex with Uriah’s wife Bathsheba.²⁴

Return from Exile

The traditional understanding of Israel’s return from exile focused on the reconstruction of the Temple and therefore judged the return a straight forward “restoration” of Israel. Actually the events during that period were much more complex.

Construction of a new Temple in Jerusalem was announced by Cyrus, king of Persia:

“Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.” (Ezra 1:2)

That declaration from Cyrus must be viewed with a degree of scepticism. Certainly the Lord allowed Cyrus and Persia to experience a temporary success as part of larger plan. That was consistent with the Lord’s use of Pharaoh:

“ . . . I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you; then I will lay my hand upon Egypt and bring forth my hosts, my people the sons of Israel,

²⁴ 2 Samuel 11:1ff.

out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgement.” (Exodus 7:3-5)

The Lord magnified Pharaoh’s stubbornness in order to create the condition for dramatic spiritual warfare through which his transcendence would be manifested, and the identity of his “*first-born son*,”²⁵ Israel, declared. The Lord similarly used Babylon, Cyrus, and Persia, to strip Israel of its yearning to defer moral responsibility to a king, and to form the people of God as envisioned in the Exodus.

In declaring that the Lord charged Cyrus *to build him a house*, Cyrus intended to create a bond between his strategic purposes and Israel’s religious tradition, as the first step in the creation of a benign satellite state which would assist in maintaining order in the empire, and funnel tax revenue back to Persia. Obviously a new king for Judah was unacceptable to Persia because that would have encouraged insurrection. The Temple, however, was intended to provide for the continuation of Judaic religious practice while simultaneously creating the requisite mechanism for tax collection under the guise of *tithes*. But the plan went awry:

“Now be it known to the king that, if this city is rebuilt and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be impaired. Now because we eat the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king’s dishonor, therefore we send to inform the king, in order that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers. You will find in the book of the records and learn that this city is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces, and that sedition was stirred up in it from of old. That was why this city was laid waste. We make known to the king that, if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, you will then have no possession in the province Beyond the River.” (Ezra 4:13-16)

And the king responded:

“. . . mighty kings have been over Jerusalem, who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River, to who tribute, custom, and toll were paid. Therefore make a decree that these men be made to cease, and that this city be not rebuilt . . .” (Ezra 4:20-21)

To achieve its strategic goals, Persia counted on the cooperation of the ruling class, and artisans, whose ancestors came from the satellite region, but who had been raised in Babylon according to Babylonian values. The success of the exile from Persia’s perspective depended on the acceptance of the leadership of those returning from exile by the common people who had been left behind. The attempted restoration encountered stiff resistance on that point. The social structure of Israel prior to the exile provided for a ruling / priestly class that answered to God on behalf of the people, and therefore protected the people from God’s wrath. The people left behind in Jerusalem suffered seventy years of anarchy, chaos, military abuse, and hunger. Why indeed would they welcome back those who had betrayed them to the Lord? . . . those who had lived a comfortable life in Babylon at their expense?

In addition, to the strong residue of bitterness, there was obvious and difficult economic considerations. The initial group that returned from Persia was:

“The whole assembly together was forty-two thousand three hundred sixty, besides their menservants and maidservants, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred and thirty-seven; and they had two hundred male and female singers.” (Ezra 2:64-65)

²⁵ Exodus 4:22

Just exactly how did that group of 49,897²⁶ people expect to live? Their ancestors had left as princes, priests, and artisans, which meant they lived on taxes, tithes, and in the case of artisans, money available for discretionary spending. That presupposed an economic infrastructure sufficiently developed and differentiated that the productive agricultural, and trading classes generated enough economic surplus so as to provide support for the ruling, priestly, and artisan classes. That infrastructure, however, was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar.²⁷ Furthermore, it was stated in Nehemiah that, “. . . *one man in ten was to come and live in Jerusalem . . .*”²⁸ and the total number of people subsequently volunteered to live in Jerusalem was 3,044.²⁹ If that was one-tenth of the total population of Israel at the time of Nehemiah, the total population was only 30,440. And that figure would have included all of the returning exiles. The discrepancy in number of returning exiles and the total population at the time of Nehemiah could not be reconciled with the information provided. But it could be concluded with certainty that the returning exiles would have caused an overwhelming economic adjustment. So the Temple was not rebuilt as originally intended:

“Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.” (Ezra 4:4-5)

The rebuilding was apparently completed in the sixth year of the reign of Darius,³⁰ but that did little to resolve the situation in Jerusalem.

Nehemiah was a high ranking official in the court of King Artaxerxes evidenced by his offering wine to the king (2:1), the king’s observation that he was sad (Nehemiah 2:2), that he requested and was granted a leave of absence to travel to, and rebuild Jerusalem (2:5), that he requested and received a letter from the king directing the governors of Transeuphrates to allow his passage (2:7), that he requested and received a letter from the king for Asaph, keeper of the king’s forest to supply Nehemiah with timber for the gates of the citadel of the Temple, for the city walls, and for his own personal house (2:8), and the king provided him an escort of army officers and horseman. (2:9)

Nehemiah apparently led a vigorous rebuilding effort (2:11 thru 3:32), overcame opposition from Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites (4:1-23), and then confronted an eruption of bitterness from the common people:

“Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brethren. For there were those who said, ‘With our sons and our daughters, we are many; let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive.’ There were also those who said, ‘We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine.’ And there were those who said, ‘We have borrowed money for the king’s tax upon our fields and our vineyards. Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children are as their children; yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved; but it is not in

²⁶ The number returning from exile was placed at 43,342 by Nehemiah 7:6-67.

²⁷ 2 Kings 24:2, and 2 Kings 25:8ff

²⁸ Nehemiah 11:1

²⁹ Nehemiah 11:4-19

³⁰ Ezra 6:16

our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards.” (5:1-5)

The *tax upon our fields and vineyards* was a “king’s tax.” Since there had not been a king in Judah since the beginning of the Babylonian Exile, the tax was for the benefit of Artaxerxes. Nehemiah reflected on the problem and called a great assembly against the nobles and the officials, and said: “*We, are far as we are able, have brought back our Jewish brethren who have been sold to the nations; but you even sell your brethren that they may be sold to us!*” (5:7-8) That sentence made no sense at all unless the “we” were those of Jewish ancestry who remained in Babylon and who gave their primary loyalty to Babylon. They bought and returned their Jewish brethren from the nations in order to build up Judah, even while the Jewish nobles and officials sold their own Jewish brethren to the nations who sold them back through Babylon to Judah. In other words, the nobles and officials whose ancestors had returned from exile provoked a crises in Judah because there was no infrastructure capable of supporting them. Consequently they prayed on the common people and enslaved and sold their children to the nations.

Nehemiah remained in Judah for twelve years after he was appointed governor by King Artaxerxes (5:14-15) and then returned to Babylon: “. . . *in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I went to the king.*” (13:6) Since Nehemiah had proposed his first journey to Judah in the twentieth year of king Artaxerxes (1:1) he actually had been sent to Judah as the king’s governor.

Nehemiah returned³¹ some years later only to become enraged at the state of affairs in Jerusalem. Eliashib had prepared a chamber for Tobiah in the courts of the house of God. Nehemiah threw out all of Tobiah’s household furniture, cleansed the chambers, and brought back the vessels with the cereal offering and the frankincense. (13:7-9) He discovered the tithe was not being delivered to the Levites and the singers, which left them impoverished and forced them to flee to their fields in order to survive off the land. When he discovered that some Israelites had married women of “. . . *Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab . . .*”³², he flew into a rage and, *cursed them, and beat some of them, and pulled out their hair.* Nehemiah then abruptly concluded his account:

“Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; and I provided for the wood offering, at appointed times, and for the first fruits.” (Nehemiah 13:30-31)

The book of Nehemiah was an account of both his trips to Jerusalem written mostly in the first person, and therefore written personally by Nehemiah. That literary form was very unusual in Biblical history and consequently its existence merited close scrutiny. The principal focus of an account written in the first person was not the historical events, but the person writing. Therefore the book of Nehemiah was really a report to someone who was primarily interested in what had been accomplished by Nehemiah in Jerusalem. Since Nehemiah had, in fact, been sent to Judah from the very beginning as the king’s governor, the account written by Nehemiah was intended for the king. His report included both the first and second visits to Jerusalem. The account of the first visit was thorough, detailed, and ended with the tenor of *mission accomplished*. The account of the second visit was very short, characterized by repeated angry outbursts by Nehemiah, and ended with the tenor of . . . *I did what I could*. The inclusion of both visits in one report meant that such a report was not routinely sent to the king after every such visit, but meant it was actually a briefing on the situation in Judah based upon observations and experiences derived from both visits. Such a briefing was one step in the formulation of future policy. Conditions in Jerusalem had produced a continuous cycle of

³¹ Nehemiah 13:7

³² Nehemiah 13:23

apparent success, followed obvious failure. Babylon had a vested interest in the economic success of Judah and therefore initiated action to create the conditions germane to a functional economy. Nehemiah's briefing made it clear previous efforts at restoration had been inadequate, but stopped short of proposing a solution.

It was stated that Ezra, “. . . *came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king (Artaxerxes) . . .*” (Ezra 7:8) But that date could not have been correct. The first six chapters of Ezra detailed efforts at reconstruction of the Temple as first commissioned by Cyrus. Those efforts ceased during the reign of Artaxerxes, and finally reached completion during the reign of Darius. The completion of the Temple was a joyful occasion: “*And they kept the feast of the unleavened bread seven days with joy; for the Lord had made them joyful . . .*” (Ezra 6:22) Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, Ezra was apparently overtaken with grief because Israelites had intermarried with other peoples. He promptly called an assembly:

“Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days; it was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month. And all the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of the heavy rain.” (Ezra 10:9)

So the *house of God* was actually completed when Ezra arrived. The problem that had previously caused a cessation in the reconstruction of the Temple was the objection of people living in Samaria who had been brought there by Assyria when Assyria conquered the Northern Tribes of Israel and took them to Assyria.³³ Nehemiah faced the same problem when he arrived in the twentieth year of king Artaxerxes to rebuild the wall.

“Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard this, it displeased them greatly that some one had come to seek the welfare of the children of Israel.” (Nehemiah2:9-10)

Since those two problems bracketed the supposed date of Ezra's arrival that date could not have been correct.

If the sequence of events actually followed the sequence of Ezra then Nehemiah, the rage toward the Israelites vented by Nehemiah on his second visit to Jerusalem would have resulted from a complete failure of Ezra, and a failure of the restoration. It was established above, however, that the book of Nehemiah was in truth a brief sent to king Artaxerxes as a step in the formulation of a future course action. It was precisely the issue of intermarriage with other people that had caused Nehemiah to explode in anger, beat people in public, and pull out their hair.³⁴ Judging by the lavish financial support afforded Ezra by king Artaxerxes, Ezra was proposed as the solution to the dilemma identified by Nehemiah's briefing.

“. . . the king granted him all that he [Ezra] asked . . .” (Ezra 7:6)

“. . . [Ezra] to convey the silver and gold which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, with all the silver and gold you shall find in the whole province of Babylonia, and

³³ Ezra 4:1ff

³⁴ Nehemiah 13:23-26

with the freewill offerings of the people and the priests, vowed willingly for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem. With this money, then, you shall with all diligence buy bulls, rams, and lambs, with their cereal offerings and their drink offerings, and you shall order them upon the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem. Whatever seems good to you and your brethren to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do.” (Ezra 7:15-18)

“And I, Artaxerxes the king, make a decree to all the treasurers in the province Beyond the River: Whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, requires of you, be it done with all diligence, up to a hundred talents of silver, a hundred cors of wheat, a hundred baths of wine, a hundred baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much.” (Ezra 7:21-22)

But the account given in the book of Ezra did not quite add up. Ezra was said to have been:

“. . . a scribe skilled in the law of Moses which the Lord God of Israel had given . . .” (Ezra 7:6)

and then it was said:

“For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach his statutes and ordinances in Israel.” (Ezra 7:10)

In his letter given to Ezra to establish the official nature of Ezra’s mission, the king said:

“For you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God, which is in your hand . . .” (Ezra 7:14)

the king further admonished Ezra:

“And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God which is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God; and those who do not know them, you shall teach. Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgement be strictly executed upon him, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment.” (Ezra 8:25-26)

Ezra was presented as *a scribe skilled in the law of Moses*. The title of *scribe* had very limited usage in Israel prior to Ezra. It first appeared when king David was quite old (1 Chronicles 24:6) when the *scribe Shemaiah recorded the divisions of the sons of Aaron*. *Scribe* was used only one more time to identify:

“Jonathan, David’s uncle, was a counselor, being a man of understanding and a scribe . . .” (1 Chronicles 27:32)

The plural, *scribes*, was used only three times before the Exile:

“The families also of the scribes that dwelt at Jabez . . .” (1 Chronicles 2:55)

“The Levites, all who were skillful with instruments of music, were over the burden bearers and directed all who did work in every kind of service; and some of the Levites were scribes, and officials, and gatekeepers.” (2 Chronicles 34:12-13)

“How can you say, ‘We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us?’ But, behold, the false pen of the scribes has made it into a lie.” (Jeremiah 8:8)

The scriptural history of *scribe* indicated that title was not highly respected at the time Ezra was in Jerusalem, and the people of Israel would not have received a scribe as a person of authority. If Ezra had indeed come to Jerusalem with the financial resources said to have been provided him by the king, he would have been received as an emissary of the king. But there was a problem with that interpretation. The account of Ezra's actual journey to Jerusalem and the initial confrontation with the Israelites who had taken foreign wives set forth in Ezra 6:27 through 9:15 was written in the first person, but the detailed account of the action taken by Ezra to resolve the problem of intermarriage as set forth in Ezra 10:1 through 10:44 was written in the third person. In addition, Ezra's reading of the law of Moses and leading the ceremony of atonement in the book of Nehemiah (8:1 through 9:37) was also written in the third person. Therefore it must be stipulated that the two accounts of Ezra written in the third person belonged together, and that Ezra's public ministry began in the very unpretentious manner depicted in the book of Nehemiah:

“And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel. And Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding . . . and he read . . . from early morning until midday . . .”
(Nehemiah 8:1-3)

The reading of the law of Moses continued for seven days. Then two weeks later, on the 24th day of the month, the people again assembled for a ceremony of atonement.³⁵ That ceremony ended with a very sad confession:

“Yet thou [Lord] hast been just in all that has come upon us, for thou hast dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly; our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept thy law or heeded thy commandments and thy warnings which thou didst give them. They did not serve thee in their kingdom, and in thy great goodness which thou gavest them, and in the large and rich land which thou didst set before them; and they did not turn from their wicked works. Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that thou gavest to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold we are slaves. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom thou hast set over us because of our sins; they have power also over our bodies and over our cattle at their pleasure, and we are in great distress.” (Nehemiah 9:33-37)

After all the fanfare surrounding the return from exile and rebuilding the Temple, the people finally admitted that those events were entirely superficial and had only been elements of a Babylonian strategy to exploit them and the land of their heritage. After that public ceremony:

“ While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children, gathered to him out of Israel; for the people wept bitterly. And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam, addressed Ezra: ‘We have broken faith with our God . . .’” (Ezra 10:1-2)

Then Israel capitulated to the demands of Babylon and made a solemn covenant in writing to pay the offerings [taxes], first fruits, and first-born son demanded by Babylon³⁶, and agreed to

³⁵ Nehemiah 9:1

³⁶ Nehemiah 9:38ff

do away with their foreign wives and their children born of those foreign wives.³⁷

The capitulation and solemn covenant to which Israel had committed had been entirely unexpected, but Nehemiah quickly realized it was a break-through and the solution to the problem evident in the briefing he had submitted to the king. He quickly wrote a fabricated account of the king's prior action³⁸ which gave credit to the king for identifying, funding, and sending forth the scribe known as Ezra. He wrote a first person account, as only he was capable, of Ezra's journey from Babylon to Jerusalem to order³⁹ to elevate Ezra's stature and make him a person worthy of the king's lavish support. He then fabricated an account (in the first person) of Ezra tearing his clothes and beard at the discovery that Israelites had intermarried with foreigners.⁴⁰ Finally, he separated the reading of the law, the ceremony of atonement, and covenant except for the issue of intermarriage from the book of Ezra and placed it in his briefing for the king in order to diminish any natural or God given authority resident in Ezra that might compete with the king's authority.

That Babylon wished to receive a steady flow of tax revenue from Judah was easily discerned, but why was marriage to foreigners the issue that brought forth repeated fits of rage from Nehemiah, and caused Nehemiah to rewrite the account of Ezra's public ministry in order to make intermarriage Ezra's principal concern, and to transfer over to Ezra his own intense emotion on that issue? It must be remembered that king David was a great king because Israel under his leadership conquered many other kingdoms. The people of those kingdoms quickly recognized David as a great leader and accepted him as their king, and became integrated into Israel. Israel consequently became bigger, greater, more powerful, and wealthier. The indication of country or culture on its way to greater power and wealth was its ability to integrate more and more people into its values, customs, and beliefs. Babylon fully understood that dynamic, and so indications of such integration in Judah were not tolerated. The danger of that possibility was evident at the very earliest stage of the return:

“Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the Lord, the God of Israel, they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of the fathers' houses and said to them, ‘Let us build with you; for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him . . .’” (Ezra 4:1-2)

And evident in a word given Isaiah:

“It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many people shall come, and say; ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob;

³⁷ Ezra 10:2ff

³⁸ Ezra 7:1 through 9:15

³⁹ Ezra 7:27-8:36

⁴⁰ Ezra 9:1-9:15

that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” (Isaiah 2:2-3)

Babylon was determined Israel would serve Babylon and remain dependent on Babylon, and therefore purposed to quickly crush any incipient movement toward independence and/or social power.

The question remained, however, what did Ezra read for seven days before the *Water Gate* that caused such an outpouring of grief from the Israelites and prompted them to sign a formal document agreeing to the demands of Babylon? It was said that: “. . . *the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel . . .*”⁴¹ In other words, Ezra was asked to read by others who, by implication, had greater authority than Ezra, and who had made the decision as to what would be read. However, that was in apparent conflict with the account in the book of Ezra in which king Artaxerxes said of Ezra:

“For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach his statutes and ordinances in Israel.” (Ezra 7:10)

“For you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God, which is in your hand . . .” (Ezra 7:14)

“And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God which is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God; and those who do not know them, you shall teach. Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgement be strictly executed upon him, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment.” (Ezra 8:25-26)

First the king gave Ezra explicit and direct authority to *teach his statutes and ordinances in Israel*. Then the king said, “. . . *according to the law of your God, which is in your hand . . .*”, and then followed again with, “. . . *according to the wisdom of your God which is in your hand . . .*” It was a clear representation that Ezra brought something *in his hand* to Jerusalem. It was established above that Nehemiah wrote the account of king Artaxerxes’ commission to Ezra in order that Ezra’s success would credit to the king. If the *law of Moses* read by Ezra was already resident in Jerusalem and known to all, the language in the king’s commission would not only have been erroneous, it would have immediately been known by all to have been erroneous. That would have diminished the value of the king’s proclamation, and worked against the very goal of elevating the king which motivated that language in the first place. So whatever was actually read by Ezra had to have been something that allowed the king to claim Ezra brought it to Jerusalem . . . *in his hand*. That meant it had to have been something new to the Israelites, and it had to have been received as of the *law of Moses*.

The second point of consideration was the role of the priests and the Temple in post-exilic Jerusalem. Babylon had no intention of allowing Israel a king, but Babylon’s strategy depended heavily on the religious leaders, priests and Temple to establish itself as a friend of Israel, to act as a conduit for tax revenue, and a channel for the prescriptive behavior Babylon desired the Israelites to appropriate. Did the priests and religious leaders have the requisite authority in the eyes of the people to accomplish the goals desired by Babylon? Nehemiah discovered during his second trip to Jerusalem that Tobiah was living in the Temple and the

⁴¹ Nehemiah 8:1

Levites and singers had fled to their fields.⁴² That was a clear indication the religious leaders did not have much respect or authority. Was that lack of respect for religious leaders unique to the Nehemiah period?

Aaron was the first and most important priest for Israel. He was appointed by the Lord to act as the spokesman for Moses in the presence of the Pharaoh,⁴³ but was not actually made a priest until much later: *“From among the sons of Israel summon your brother Aaron and his sons to be priests in my service.”* (Exodus 28:1) From the time the Lord first told Moses Aaron would speak for him, until Aaron’s formal investiture as priest Aaron was apparently second in importance only to Moses during the most important period in the history of Israel.

The Lord spoke directly to Aaron:

“The Lord said to Aaron, ‘Go into the wilderness to meet Moses.’” (Exodus 4:27)

Aaron stood with Moses before Pharaoh:

“Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go . . .’” (Exodus 5:1)

And Moses and Aaron stood before the Lord together:

“But the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, and gave them a charge to the people of Israel . . .” (Exodus 6:13)

In spite of Aaron’s important role in the Exodus, and his pervasive presence throughout the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, he received scant attention during the hundreds of years of history that followed. Aaron was mentioned in Joshua 21:4, but only in the context of the assignment of territory to his sons. He was mentioned by Joshua (24:5) in a recital of Israel’s history. He was mentioned once in Judges, but the statement was really about his grandson *Phinehas*, who ministered at the ark at that time.⁴⁴ He was afforded more respect in 1 Samuel when he and Moses were acknowledged by Samuel as the Lord’s servants.⁴⁵ Aaron was mentioned 21 times in 1 & 2 Chronicles, but only in the context of genealogy or ritual practices. He was not mentioned at all in 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, or by any of the prophets. The only possible conclusion was a very substantial discontinuity between Aaron and the office of priest as set forth in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, and the lack of significant authority and respect accorded Aaron and the priesthood throughout the rest of the Old Testament.

The dilemma which faced the priesthood at the time of Ezra was strong pressure from Babylon for the Temple and priesthood to affect the social organization of Israel consistent with the strategic objectives of Babylon, even while the priesthood and Temple were not accorded the requisite authority by the people. There was, consequently, great pressure on the priesthood to strengthen its authority to comply with the demands of Babylon and alleviate the suffering of the people. To that end, the priesthood, at the time of Ezra, created the latter chapters of Exodus dealing with temple, priesthood and cultic practice, and the books of Leviticus and Numbers. That analysis was confirmed by the contradiction between Leviticus 11:13-15 and 1 Kings 17:3-4.

⁴² Nehemiah 13:7-10

⁴³ Exodus 4:14

⁴⁴ Judges 20:28

⁴⁵ 1 Samuel 12:6

“And these you shall have in abomination among the birds, they shall not be eaten, they are an abomination . . . every raven according to its kind . . .”
(Leviticus 11:13-15)

And the direction given Elijah by the Lord when he sent Elijah into the wilderness to hide by the brook Cherith:

“You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.” (1 Kings 17:3-4)

The Lord would not have ordered the Ravens to feed Elijah if he had previously declared them an abomination.

Reading of the *new law of Moses* by Ezra in front of the *Water Gate* caused a dramatic upwelling of contrition because the people were in an extreme state of duress and it was the first time they had heard the “*law of Moses*,” expressed as explicit, easily understood cultic and dietary practices, and they clearly understood they had not “honored” those cultic and dietary demands. Was the overwhelming grief and repentance a good thing? The priesthood had set in motion a replay of the Deuteronomic Reform under Josiah that meant well but was not ordered by the Lord. The dismissal of foreign wives and the discard of children born of those wives was repugnant to the Lord and worked against his expressed desire for Israel to attract the nations of the world to him. The desire of the Lord for his people as expressed in the covenant and through the prophets was for his people to rely on him and not on false gods, and to champion his glory to the world. He wanted a people who shared his passion for justice. Those were more complex, subjective issues that required reflection and holiness. But the people of God had abdicated that responsibility for considered holiness when they transferred moral responsibility to the monarchy. Though the reading before the *Water Gate* brought conviction and repentance, it did not set the course for the people desired by the Lord. That course had already been established through the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. The Lord would again become king of his people as established in the covenant and intended for all time. Any earthly institution that stood between the Lord and his people would be destroyed. And the Lord would establish himself in the heart of the individual:

“I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest . . .” (Jeremiah 31:33-34)

The Lord’s work to form his people did not stop with Jeremiah. Indeed, it continued unceasingly though the remnant that actually heard his word, moved forward in the direction he prescribed, and became the force that preserved Israel in spite of Babylon. Above all, the remnant was not a few heroic figures, but rather a diffuse group without organization or overt identity. From within that group emerged the reflection on the human propensity to turn away from the living, life-giving God which thereafter produced the account of creation and of original sin. They recorded the stories of Noah, Job, Daniel, Ester, Jonah and others who served their Lord by themselves, without the aid of king, priest, or community. A person or persons within that group wrote the story of the book of Ruth as a counter-point to Babylon’s ban on intermarriage to remind the people of God that a woman as important as the great-grandmother of king David was a Moabite. And that she was a deeply loyal, honorable, and good person, and a participant in God’s plan. They generated Psalms and Proverbs and other contributions to the Wisdom Literature as they pondered the Lord’s nature and the role of justice and holiness in the day to day issues that made up the life of ordinary people. And it

was the remnant that recognized Jesus as the Son of God.⁴⁶

Promulgation of the latter chapters of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers resulted in the submission and cooperation of Israel that Nehemiah and king Artaxerxes had sought but failed to achieve. Naturally Nehemiah and the king bestowed favor on Ezra and the religious leaders, which, in turn, set the foundation for a wealthy religious establishment. When Babylon was conquered by Alexander the Great (circa 331 BC) that religious establishment had enough wealth and owned enough land to be self-perpetuating. It was that social class that produced king Herod and the high priests and also the people who viewed Christ as a threat to their wealth and authority and sought his crucifixion.

Israel after Christ

“ . . . Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand . . . ’” (Mark 1:14-15)

Indeed, time was fulfilled in Christ. The formation of the remnant had prepared them to accept personal responsibility for their relationship with God. In the crucifixion, “. . . *the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom . . .*” (Matthew 27:51). That curtain had been the barrier that allowed the high priest to stand in the presence of God, while preventing all others from experiencing that same divine presence. Tearing of that curtain from top to bottom meant that henceforth all people had direct access to God. In the resurrection Jesus was confirmed as the Son of God, and the holder of all authority over heaven and earth.⁴⁷ The removal of divine authority from the Temple and from Israel’s religious establishment was confirmed by the physical destruction of the Temple by Rome in 70 AD, and the slaughter of the last vestiges of the religious establishment at Masada in 73 AD by the same Roman army. Matthew set forth a clear and thorough presentation of the Lord’s teaching on the Kingdom of heaven, and structured that presentation in the framework of the Covenant established by God with his people in the desert of Sinai.⁴⁸ Both Matthew and Luke sought to make it clear *Christianity* was a continuation of the salvation history begun with Israel. All of the original disciples, and nearly all of the first *Christians* were Jewish. When the Apostle Paul went forth on his missionary journeys he made a habit of first contacting the gathering of Jews in the cities he entered to tell them that Jesus was the expected Messiah. He discussed, argued, converted or sometimes was chased out of town by those Jews. Nevertheless, the Jewish diaspora was the opportunity and the catalyst for the expansion of the Kingdom of heaven. In that expansion, the people of God fulfilled the mandate given by the Lord through Isaiah:

*“It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of
the house of the Lord
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,
and many people shall come,
and say;
‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,*

⁴⁶ See [Reconciling the Four Gospels](#) on this website.

⁴⁷ Matthew 28:18

⁴⁸ Refer to [Reconciling the Four Gospels](#) on this website.

*to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his
paths.’ (Isaiah 2:2ff)*

The strategy of first approaching the Jewish community in a given city waned in importance as Christianity spread, but it was still very likely the Jewish diaspora would have been completely assimilated if not for the collapse of the Roman Empire. The strength of that empire had been its communication and economic infrastructure. The collapse of that infrastructure meant the collapse of business relations and channels of communication, which were never effectively restored. People were forced to fall back on their ethnic identity for survival, but that left them isolated, vulnerable, and impoverished. Such was the case with much of the remaining Jewish diaspora.

Christendom returned to expansive development, but in Europe, and the forces driving that development were different. North Africa and the Middle East were left behind. The cultural dynamic that brought success in Europe⁴⁹ crystalized and magnified a previously insignificant difference between Israel and Christianity.

Jesus had made it quite clear Christians could not charge interest on the lending of money:

“And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great . . .” (Luke 6:34-35)

But no such restriction on earning interest on the lending of money existed in the Old Testament. The freedom to lend for profit was complimented by the tight community tradition, later referred to derisively as ghetto mentality, of the Jews. Prior to the fall of the Roman Empire, that tight community tradition was a natural and accepted way for Jews of the diaspora to maintain their customs and beliefs. Israelites in the native land had relied primarily on agriculture for a livelihood, but such land ownership was seldom available to them in the diaspora. Therefore Jews of the diaspora had to learn skills that could be marketed to the cultures in which they resided. They could not be skills that required “teamwork” or extensive interaction with native workers, for that would have exacerbated base prejudices.⁵⁰ Therefore Jews of the diaspora tended toward individual skills such as musicians, diamond cutters, instrument manufacture, to name a few. Since they were not absorbed into the culture in which they resided, their community tradition caused them to pass their skill onto succeeding generations. Over time that led to Jewish dominance in certain specialized occupations. The community prospered, but the lack of assimilation into the culture of residence meant there were few opportunities to spend the money earned, and therefore Jewish people became a community of savers.

The population of Europe increased and became more urbanized and consequently generated more opportunities for the aristocracy to pursue business and military ventures. Such ventures required financing, but there was no effective source for such financing from within Christianity. The aristocracy soon realized the Jewish population was the answer to that need, and the Jewish financial resource quickly became absolutely essential to Europe. There was, however, a dark side to that business arrangement. The aristocracy usually repaid the loans along with the interest in those cases where the business or military ventures were successful, but often did not when such ventures failed. In cases where the losses of the aristocracy were substantial or their reputation in jeopardy, a way was found to blame or persecute the very

⁴⁹ See [A Treatise on Institutional Authority in Christianity](#) on this website.

⁵⁰ [The Church in the Age of Feudalism, Volume III: HANDBOOK OF CHURCH HISTORY](#), Ed. Hubert Jedin & John Dolan; Chapter 60 (by Erwin Iserloh), pages 603-613; Herder - Freiburg & Palm Publishers - Montreal, 1970.

Jewish community that had supplied the financing. The cycle of solicitation of a Jewish community for financing with promises, assurances, gifts and prestige, and then persecution the same Jewish community when the loans could not be repaid was a cycle that repeated hundreds of times from the Early Middle Ages to the Twentieth century. An example of that cycle led to the “*York Riots*” in England, March 16-17, 1190.⁵¹ Richard the Lion-Hearted was crowned king of England in 1189 and promptly began raising money for the third Crusade. The Jews were first encouraged to build fine houses of stone, and their leader a house that rivaled a “noble citadel.” Then King Richard issued writs guaranteeing security to the Jews. Later, when the nobility was on the verge of financial ruin, taxes on the lower class were raised to the point where the “*lower estates*” were on the verge of insurrection. The aristocracy responded by skillfully shifting the blame for England’s desperate economic condition to the Jews who had previously financed England’s crusades. The “*York Riots*” that followed resulted in the brutal execution of nearly all of the Jewish community by England’s “*lower estates*.”

Jewish money likewise financed the expansion of the Weimar Republic in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. The Treaty of Versailles that marked the end of World War I forced desperate economic conditions and rampant inflation on Germany. Consistent with the long established pattern in Europe, Hitler’s Germany, blamed the Jews, the *financiers*, for their economic woes. The Holocaust, the consequent persecution of the Jews, was so brutal, so inhuman, and so extensive, the world finally took notice of the treatment of Jews in Christian Europe and supported the creation of the state of Israel in 1948.

The Lord’s Plan for Israel

The new state of Israel began with broad international support and the conviction among many that the return of Jews to their homeland was a genuine act of God. Since that euphoric beginning Israel has degenerated to a grim determination to make their values and vision succeed “*no matter what the cost*.” In other words, the new state of Israel developed and degenerated in a manner no different than enumerable other cultures derived from false expressions of an imagined absolute truth. The modern state of Israel was actually created by the United Nations, a secular institution, and modern Israel chose to define itself as a secular state. Prior to the resurrection of Jesus, God was active in the life of Israel as an agent of transformation, repentance, and/or return. After, “. . . *all authority in heaven and earth*,”⁵² passed to Jesus in the resurrection that active power of God in the affairs of Israel ceased. The diaspora remained trapped in a demeaning relationship with Western Civilization until that civilization became sufficiently appalled at its own behavior to force the creation of the new state of Israel. Therefore the new state of Israel carried no divine authority. Least Christians and Jews be confused on that point, the Lord bestowed no authority on a people who played to secular justification one day and claimed divine justification the next. That was always, and will always remain, deeply repugnant behavior in the eyes of the Lord.

There was, nevertheless, another perspective on Israel. A person of deep faith will know that all of creation belonged to the Lord, and that nothing therein occurred without his knowledge and without integration into his plan for salvation of the human race. A person of such faith will know the modern state of Israel was indeed the work of his hand. A clear distinction must be made, however, between events that were an unequivocal expressions of the Lord’s transcendence, such as occurred during the Exodus, with Elijah at Mount Carmel, and the resurrection, and historical events such as the creation of the modern state of Israel. The direct

⁵¹ The Jew in the Medieval World: A Source Book: 315 - 1791, J. Marcus, Athenaeum, New York, 1973.

⁵² Matthew 28:18

manifestation of the transcendent God instilled divine authority in Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. Events such as the creation of the modern state of Israel, which did not result from the direct action of God, communicated no divine authority whatsoever. The proper response of those with the faith to see God's will in that event was not the presumption of God's authority, but the determination to inquire of the Lord . . . *why Lord have you brought this favor to us? . . . how can we return honor to you?* To inquire of the Lord . . . to wait on him . . . to strive to do his bidding . . . was holiness.

“ . . . and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Exodus 19:06)

Israel was called to be a holy nation. That meant a nation of people who inquired of the Lord . . . waited on the Lord . . . sought to do the Lord's will. Holiness would have caused Israel of the diaspora to understand the critically important role they were still destined to play in the Lord's plan for the human race.

Two claims to absolute truth cannot coexist.⁵³ They would inevitably war against each other until one prevailed and the other was relegated to archives of history. Such was the relationship with the Roman Empire and Christianity in the early centuries after the resurrection. The two were engaged in a spiritual war from which there could have been only one survivor. The cornerstone of Roman power had been its ability and willingness to administer brutal death. It delighted in the opportunity for public displays of that power and brutality such as was offered the crucifixion of Jesus. Brutal death was so important to the Roman culture the most popular pastime of its citizens was the experience of ritualized re-enactment of the administration of brutal death. That ritualized social custom was the Coliseum . . . the gladiator battles, the feeding people to wild animals. Despite Rome's obsession, brutal death was completely ineffective against Christianity. The resurrection of Jesus had rendered the prospect of brutal death powerless. It did not cause Christians to capitulate, conform, or acknowledge the “divine” power of Rome. That which had once made Rome so powerful, then rendered Rome powerless. The disintegration of the Roman Empire was thereafter an inevitable social process.

Christianity did not, however, escape the spiritual warfare with Rome unscathed. In their battle with Rome, they drew strength from the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and from a fervent belief in life after death. In doing so they became excessively ethereal . . . excessively focused on a kingdom not of this world. However necessary those attitudes may have been in the struggle with Rome, it resulted in neglect of the practical necessities of culture and commerce. The world, as wicked as it was, still needed an absolute truth upon which to organize itself, and that meant it was meant it was still subject to the brutality and death engendered by the rise and collapse of false gods.

It was the task of the Jewish diaspora in the modern period to remind the Christianity that the kingdom of God encompassed heaven and earth.

Israel was also called to be a *kingdom of priests*. What did that mean? Certainly not the incineration of a chopped-up bull on a pile of wood. Certainly not standing in the presence of God behind a curtain so others could be excluded from that presence. Certainly not walking around inside a big temple when Jesus had established that the Temple of the Holy Spirit was the body. What then was a priest?

“For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with

⁵³ See [a vision](#) on this website.

weakness. Because of this he is bound to offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not take the honor upon himself, but he is called by God . . .” (Hebrews 5:1-4)

“ . . . every high priest chosen from among men . . .” That statement did not include Jesus since he was God, but it did include Israel since Israel included *men*. The statement did not limit those chosen to “men,” but did say high priests were chosen from among men.

“*Because of this he is bound to offer sacrifice for his own sins . . .*” A high priest was chosen by God from among men, but first got it all wrong and sinned against the very God who authored the *call*. That point was exemplified by the Apostle Paul, “. . . *when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace . . .*” (Galatians 1:15 - Jerusalem Bible)

“*For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it . . .*” (Galatians 1:13 - Jerusalem Bible)

“*He has appointed me as a priest of Jesus Christ, and I am to carry out my priestly duty by bringing the Good News from God to the pagans . . .*” (Romans 15:16 - Jerusalem Bible)

Paul was set apart for the Lord’s service before he was born. Israel was called by God to be a kingdom of priests while they were still babes and knew not of the Lord’s ways.

Paul got it all wrong and warred against the purposes of the Lord and sought to destroy his people. Israel got it all wrong many times over the centuries of salvation history by believing they knew better than the Lord how their affairs should have been conducted..

It was only by priests knowing they had first made a mess of their own lives and caused chaos to rein in the lives of others that they had the compassion and humility to be true priests.

“*Because of this he is bound to offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people.*” What did it mean to “offer sacrifices for the sins of others?” Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice for the sin of all. The depth of meaning behind that sacrifice was revealed in Jesus’ prayer to the Father in the Gospel of John:

“*Holy Father, keep those you have given me true to your name, so that they may be one like us. While I was with them, I kept those you had given me true to your name. I have watched over them and not one is lost . . .*” (John 17:11-12 - Jerusalem Bible)

“*I kept those you have given me true to your name . . .*” Jesus took responsibility for those the Father gave him. He did not blame, nor hold them responsible for their salvation.

“*Holy Father, keep those you have given me true to your name . . .*” Jesus asked the Father to also take responsibility for those he gave to the Son.

Therefore, offering a sacrifice for the sins of others meant taking responsibility for their sin . . . *allow me Lord, to take responsibility for the sin of others.*

And what was the sacrifice that was to be offered for the sin of others?

“*We wish you the grace and peace of God our Father and of the Lord Jesus Christ, who in order to rescue us from this present wicked world sacrificed himself for our sins . . .*” (Galatians 1:3-4 - Jerusalem Bible)

The sacrifice for the sins of others required of those who are called as priests was the sacrifice of self. Israel, as a kingdom of priests, was called to offer themselves as a holy sacrifice for others. Who were those others for whom Israel was called to make that holy sacrifice?

“Abram bowed to the ground and God said to him, ‘Here now is my covenant with you: you shall become the father of a multitude of nations. You shall no longer be called Abram; your name shall be Abraham, for I make you father of a multitude of nations. I will make you most fruitful. I will make you into nations, and your issue shall be kings.’” (Genesis 17:3-7)

The holy priesthood of Israel was given, and still has, responsibility for the Middle East.