

## Chapter Six

### Truly Strategic Scriptures Avoided by the Lectionary

by Robert C. Linthicum

Since the lectionary specializes in organizing the full spectrum of scripture for use in the church's public worship, it is intriguing to note that there are portions of scripture that are avoided in the lectionary. And some of that scripture would be considered particularly strategic to the themes of justice and shalom. Why would such key scripture be excluded from the lectionary?

If one examines the scripture that is not used (including several entire books of the Bible), one begins to observe a distinct pattern in that exclusion. Some of the scripture excluded is self-apparent, consisting of long genealogies or census figures that would "not preach well". But others are some of the most important passages in the Bible. However, those passages deal with political, economic or religious policies or actions of Israel or the church that would prove awkward, embarrassing or even offensive for a sedate and refined middle-class congregation! Because these passages are so important and should not be ignored in any study of justice and shalom, this chapter includes a commentary on each of these missing strategic passages. They are listed in the standard biblical order found in any published Bible, and are in numeric order under their respective book settings. The index of all the scripture used in this study lists those scriptures under their respective books, instructing the reader to go to this chapter.

So we invite you now to read those scriptures that ought to have been included in the lectionary – but were avoided instead!

#### **GENESIS 18:16-33**

**Genesis 18:16-33.** Sam Kamaleson, a noted Methodist preacher from Chennai, India and a vice-president of World Vision International, was speaking to the three hundred pastors assembled at a conference on urban ministry held near Ahmadabad, India. I was privileged to be traveling with Dr. Kamaleson, as he and I were speaking at pastors' conferences sponsored by World Vision throughout India in 1990. This particular address that Dr. Kamaleson was giving focused on the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18 and 19.

Dr. Kamaleson worked with scripture that day that brought an entirely new insight to me and to all the pastors gathered there about the work of God's people in the city. I could hardly wait to get back to my library in the United States to see if Kamaleson was right in his interpretation of what is a very controversial passage. If he was right, it would reveal an entirely new dimension (at least to me) of God's love for the city, one that would remove much ambiguity from that controversial passage about Abraham's bargaining with God for the deliverance of Sodom.

When I returned home to California three weeks later, I made a beeline for my reference books. There I discovered that Dr. Kamaleson's insights were clearly supported by such respected Old Testament scholars as E.A. Speiser and Gerhard von Rad.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Sam was right!

What was this interpretation that so electrified three hundred Indian pastors and one American preacher?

In Genesis 18, Abraham is visited by three men who predict the birth of Isaac and announce, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if (they should be destroyed)" (vv. 20-21). It became quickly apparent to Abraham that the three visitors were not men, but manifestations of the Lord God. According to verse 22, "The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord." In audience before God, Abraham began his famed negotiations for the rescue of Sodom and Gomorrah from divine destruction.

Dr. Kamaleson told his audience that the earliest manuscripts do not support the reading, "Abraham remained standing before the Lord". He contended, instead, that there is irrefutable textual evidence that the passage originally read, "The Lord remained standing before Abraham!" Who was begging whom for the city? Could it be that a scribe, thinking this reading could not possibly be right, reversed the text?<sup>2</sup>

Even if this suggested original reading is not true, Genesis 18 remains a profound statement of God's love for the city, the role of intercession, and the presence God's people have in a pagan society. But if it *is* true, it has profound implications for our understanding of the church's responsibility in its city.

If the passage correctly reads, "The Lord remained standing before Abraham", it means God was the supplicant before Abraham for the city! It was **God** begging for Sodom's deliverance before a judgmental **Abraham!** It is as if God were saying to the patriarch, "I take seriously the entreaties of my people. So go on, Abraham – ask me! Ask me to spare Sodom for fifty people – and I'll do it!"

Tentatively, Abraham asks in faith to spare the city for fifty people, and God responds, "Done!"

"Go on, man, ask me! Ask me for forty!"

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<sup>1</sup> E.A. Speiser, *Genesis: The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), p. 134: "*Yahweh paused in front of Abraham*. So the original text. But the passage is listed among the rare instances of Masoretic interference known as *Tiqqune soferim* 'scribal corrections,' whereby the text was changed to 'Abraham paused before Yahweh,' for deferential reasons. The change is already witnessed in LXX." Also Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 206: "In v. 22 occurs one of the very few arbitrary changes which the postexilic Jewish men of learning dared to make in the text (and which were of course precisely noted): That Yahweh remained standing, as though waiting, for Abraham, appeared to them as unworthy of Yahweh. Therefore they changed the sentences so that Abraham remained standing before Yahweh. They sacrificed, therefore, Yahweh's gesture of lingering, which contained a silent demand to express itself, to their religious timidity."

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

“Lord, spare the city for forty people.”

“Done! Go on, ask me for thirty!”

“Lord, thirty?”

“Done. Ask for twenty!”

If Abraham had asked for it, would God have spared the city for one family – the family of Lot? Would he have spared it for Lot alone? If the wording of Genesis 18:22 has indeed been reversed, then the answer clearly is “Yes”! God so loved Abraham and so loved Sodom and Gomorrah, he would have given the salvation of the city to Abraham for anything the old man had asked. God *wanted* the city saved. God’s sense of justice, however, demanded judgment.

“Go on, man, ask me! I want to forgive; I want to stave off judgment.” Beyond his request for ten people Abraham could not go. So it was that the bargaining stopped – *not because God lacked mercy, but because Abraham lacked nerve!*

Considered this way, Abraham’s response to God standing before him for Sodom is another trial of faith. Could he believe God for the birth of the promised son? Abraham turned to Hagar because he thought Sarah barren, and Ishmael was born. Could he believe God for the pregnancy of Sarah? Sarah laughed and Abraham wavered. Could he sufficiently believe God for the city? He could not; he could not barter with God far enough. This makes Abraham’s later trust in God – when he faced God’s demand for Isaac’s sacrifice – even more remarkable. It is an indication of how Abraham had grown over the years in his trust in God.

That is God’s cry as he stands before us and pleads for the city. We are called by God to be his community, both the foretaste of the kingdom and its present embodiment. All that the city will know of God’s kingdom, it will know from our life together, our witness, and our commitment to the city’s broken, hurting and poor.

“Go on, man, ask me! Go on, woman, ask me for the city!” Do we have sufficient nerve to ask God for our city – the nerve to be in the city, to proclaim and to work for justice, for what God calls the church to be? Are we willing to be the embodiment of the kingdom of God in our city?

“Go on, church – ask me for your city!”<sup>3</sup>

## **EXODUS 1:17-20; 2:11-22; 2:23-25; 18:1-27**

**Exodus 1:17-20** is a most intriguing biblical story.

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<sup>3</sup> Taken from Robert C. Linthicum, *City of God; City of Satan: A Biblical Theology of the Urban Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), pp. 106-108.

“Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from our land.” . . . So the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birth stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and grew strong.” (Exodus 1:8-10, 15-20)

Because they “feared God”, Shiphrah and Puah simply disobeyed Pharaoh! Told to kill the male babies, these midwives refused to do so. And then, when asked by Pharaoh why his plan was failing, they lied to him. They told him that the Hebrew women gave birth to their babies before the midwives could get to them. Of course, this was not true. But Pharaoh accepted their explanation, and “the people multiplied and became very strong”.

This is a classic case of civil disobedience. Shiphrah and Puah refused to follow the Pharaoh’s orders, and lied to cover up their defiance (they could not have openly defied the Pharaoh and live). And God blessed their disobedience.

Of course, this was only a temporary reprieve. Eventually, frustrated by the midwives, Pharaoh gave the order, “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews shall be thrown into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live” (1:22). But Shiphrah and Puah had won a temporary reprieve that saved the lives of at least some Hebrew children.

Civil disobedience works best when those who are protesting are not politically powerful enough to successfully confront. But even though it is passively resistant, the power of civil disobedience is enormous. The witness to that was its use by Gandhi in eventually overthrowing the might of the British Empire in India – or even more clearly, the use of civil disobedience by the Civil Rights movement as the means to both win strategic political struggles in the south and to raise the consciousness of all the United States regarding our nation-wide racism.<sup>4</sup>

**Exodus 2:11-22.** In the middle of the second millennium before the Common Era, the people of Israel lived in bondage to the Egyptian Empire. They were both under Egyptian domination and also provided much of the back-breaking labor that both contributed to Egypt’s wealth and built its monuments. Resistance against Egyptian domination by the Hebrew slaves was spasmodic and individual (such as in the case of Shiphrah and Puah: Exodus 1:17-20). But then, according to the Hebrew Scriptures, a leader arose in Israel who pulled the people together and freed them from Egyptian domination. This man was named Moses!

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<sup>4</sup> Robert C. Linthicum, *Transforming Power: Biblical Strategies for Making a Difference in Your Community* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 166-167.

Who was Moses? The only record which exists about him is the biblical record. He is mentioned nowhere else. Yet there was probably no emperor, general or philosopher more influential than he. This one man reputedly led this enslaved people to freedom, developed them into a nation, gave birth to a faith from which two world religions would develop, devised a law code and a government, and introduced the God Yahweh to the world. Moses was undoubtedly one of the most influential men who ever lived. With Moses' contribution both the *faith* of Israel and the *history* of Israel began. This is his story – spread across the biblical books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. And this is our justice commentary (across these four books) on Moses, the man who birthed the shalom community!

Moses was a man who seemed blessed by God. The baby of Israelite slaves, Moses was rescued from almost certain death to be adopted by the daughter of the king of Egypt (Exodus 2:1-10). Raised as her son, Moses was "instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts 7:22).

Growing up in the royal court of Egypt and grandson to the Pharaoh, what would this prince of Egypt (Heb. 11:24-26) have learned? First, there would have been his formal education. The topics he likely pursued with his tutors would have been political science, public administration, military science, the Egyptian religion, history, literature, geometry, geography and perhaps even engineering and hydraulics.

But there would have been his informal education as well - the "school of hard knocks". As a participant in the life of the royal court and as a military commander, Moses would have learned a great deal about political intrigue, the use of power politics, the relative effectiveness of confrontation versus compromise. In the military campaign Hebrew tradition tells us he led into Ethiopia, he would have learned much about commanding and leading an army, mobilizing a large force of people, setting strategic and tactical objectives, and handling the logistics of limited resources.

Now, if you had asked Moses why he was learning all of this, he would likely have responded, "In order to someday be a competent ruler or administrator of Egypt." But God had Moses learn all these things for an entirely different purpose.

When Moses had reached forty years of age, the Scripture tells us, he happened into the Israelite slave encampment and saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave (2:11-15a). His blood rose at such injustice. Taking the matter into his own hand, Moses killed the Egyptian and buried his body in the sand.

Moses thought he had gotten away with his act of vengeance. But by the next day, the deed was known throughout the land of Egypt. Moses, realizing he was now a wanted murderer, fled Egypt and escaped into the desert (2:14-16).

In this story, the young Moses is described to the reader as a person with a strong sense of justice. That commitment to justice is handled in an immature way, because the story suggests a leader who is impetuous, devious, believing that he had the right to judge and to wreck vengeance on anyone acting unjustly.

There is no indication in this scripture that, at this time, Moses identified himself as a Hebrew. One could argue that his defense of the beaten Hebrew slave was because Moses felt a kinship with that slave. However, the text doesn't suggest that. It could be equally argued that Moses acted in the way he did because he was a man who cared a great deal about justice, and he saw an overlord beating upon a slave -- so Moses simply acted to stop such an act of injustice.

Nor is there any suggestion in this text that Moses had any knowledge of or relationship with God. It could be argued that, raised as an Egyptian, Moses worshipped the Egyptian gods and was ignorant of the God of the Hebrews. There is nothing in this biblical account to suggest any awareness of -- much less commitment to -- the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Escaping from the wrath of Pharaoh, the criminal Moses fled to the land of Midian, stopping by a well to rest. The daughters of a priest of Midian came to the well to draw water. But then shepherds also arrived and, wanting the water for themselves, drove away the women. Again, Moses' hatred of injustice was raised and he attacked the shepherds, driving them off. The daughters, grateful for his intervention, took him home to meet their father who invited Moses to settle with them. Eventually, Moses married one of the daughters, raised a family and settled down to the life of a shepherd (2:15b-22). Thus had the mighty fallen!

Moses' defense of the daughters of Reuel (Jethro) lends credence to the argument that Moses' attack upon the Egyptian was fueled by his commitment to justice, not to his sense of kinship with the Hebrews. It is a further indication that what drove Moses was the defense of anyone who was being treated unjustly -- whether Hebrew slave or Midianite women. Apparently, both the sense of justice and the tendency toward impetuosity ran very, very deeply within Moses.

Over the next forty years, Moses lived as a shepherd on the backside of the desert -- caring for his father-in-law's sheep, raising a family, and living life a far cry from his former experience of the Egyptian court. Presumably, he believed that this was to be the remaining pattern of his life -- that all the glory of being an Egyptian prince lay behind him, and that he would live the remainder of his life and would die as a desert shepherd.

But in the forty years Moses spent as a shepherd in the desert, he was "back in school" - learning about how to survive in a desert, learning to read the "signs" of a desert, learning the routes to and locations of the oases of life-giving water. He would have learned about animal husbandry, desert health-care and the nature of primitive communities. In his daily life, tending sheep on the backside of the desert, this former prince of Egypt learned much about humility, helplessness, weakness and the relative meaninglessness of an ordinary peasant's life. But most of all, he would have learned about God and himself.

One of the most intriguing references in this account of Moses becoming part of Reuel's family is that this man is called "the priest of Midian" (2:16). His name, Reuel, means "friend (or even "companion") of God" and is similar to the Hebrew word for "shepherd" (a "good shepherd" in contrast to those shepherds who sought to take away the water for Reuel's sheep). He is also called "Jethro" (Exod. 3:1; 4:18; 18:1-12) and, after the exodus has occurred,

acknowledges that the god in which he believed is the God whom Moses called “Yahweh” (18:10-11).

It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that Moses would have been introduced to the god of Jethro (Reuel), the desert deity quite unlike the gods of Egypt which seemed only an extension of the people who worshipped them. There Moses learned to embrace the faith of those who trusted in the God of Mount Sinai -- the God who was above all other gods, the God who was unknowable, the God who had no name! There is no suggestion in the book of Exodus that Moses knew anything about the God of the Israelites before he lived with this Bedouin family, or even wanted to know. But there in the harshness of the desert, Moses discovered a god of compassion and justice (Exodus 2:23-25).

Now, if you had asked Moses why he was experiencing all that he was learning in his desert existence, he would likely have responded, "In order to survive as a shepherd in the desert". But God had Moses learn all these things for an entirely different reason. And that reason revealed itself on one memorable day that would forever change Moses' life.

**Exodus 2:23-25.** It begins with the groans! Salvation begins with the pain of being lost! Liberation begins with the groan of being powerless! All transformation – whether spiritual or physical – must begin with the groans of the people!

Before the story of Israel’s liberation from Egyptian slavery begins, the author of Exodus includes a very intriguing story in his account. “After a long time, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them” (Exodus 2:23-25).

The story of the Exodus begins with the groans of the people. And why did the people groan? It was because of their burden under bondage to the empire. The Israelites were in slavery to Egypt; they were economically, politically and spiritually beaten down by the power and might of the empire.

Such bondage is a recurring theme in Scripture. There are always the empires! There are always the principalities and powers, whether alive in Egypt or Assyria, in Babylonia or Greece, in Rome or in Israel itself. The “empire” is everywhere, oppressing individuals and families and tribes and nations in any way it can, politically or economically or spiritually. The empire is the very personification of evil, the abode of principalities and powers.

So what did the Israelites do about their bondage to the Egyptian empire? “The people groaned under their slavery, and cried out, and their cry for help rose up to God”. Pay attention carefully to the wording of this passage, for that wording is crucial to the biblical understanding of the way God works. The text tells us that the people were so burdened, so oppressed, so crushed by their enslavement that they “groaned under their slavery”. They didn’t complain. They didn’t rail against God. They groaned! The Hebrew suggests almost an animal-like groan, an unearthly moan that forces its ways past one’s lips in spite of one’s attempt to control it!

So it was that the people groaned under their suffering. And now, take notice of what the scripture both says and does not say. It does not say that the people prayed to God, that they cried out to God, that they moaned to God. There is no mention of God in their groaning. What the text clearly says is that the people “cried out” – “and their cry for help rose up to God!” The cry of Hebrew pain was almost like an offering wafted up to God’s nostrils! The Israelites simply groaned to nobody or nothing in particular. They simply groaned! And, the text tells us, “God heard, God remembered, God looked upon their situation, and God “took notice” of them.”<sup>5</sup>

And “take notice” is exactly what God does. For the very next words in this story are these: “Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush” (3:1-2a). And the liberation of the children of Israel – and the beginning of salvation history – began!

Transformation of any situation or of any people, whether spiritual or physical, must include three ingredients. Those three ingredients and the agency that activates those ingredients are suggested in this story and the Exodus stories that follow. First and foremost, there must be pain that is given voice. The people must be in sufficient distress that they “groan under their slavery, and cry out.” No radical transformation begins without it being grounded in pain; there is no place in authentic regeneration – whether personal or national – for simply an intellectual recognition that there must be change. Intellectual acknowledgement of an evil condition is insufficient for activating change. It must come from the people’s guts.

Second, the people must begin perceiving a new alternative to that pain. They must begin to imagine human existence in a different way than that to which they had previously resigned themselves. But because it is extremely difficult for people to perceive a “way out” of their pain while they are inundated with that pain, an agency outside themselves needs to offer to them a different way of imagining their reality. In this story, it is God who is the outside agent (“God heard, God remembered, God looked upon, and God took action”). Later in the story of Exodus, it is Moses. It might be Jesus. It might be a prophet, who proclaims a new way of imagining their situation with the words, “Thus says the Lord”. It might be the Spirit. It might even be a preacher or a community organizer. But, in essence, there has to be someone who says to the people, “You don’t have to put up with this” and begins to offer an alternative. But then the people must engage in this reflective work themselves, so that it is not just the prophet’s or preacher’s or even God’s perspective but becomes the people’s understanding as they begin to re-imagine their situation.

Third, the people must be willing to act upon what they have reimagined, spurred on by the pain they will otherwise continue to feel. And they must be willing to accept pain that will come as the result of their actions in order to experience ultimate healing. The people must act, and no agent – whether God or human – can do it for them. The agent might cry to Pharaoh, “Let my people go”. But the people must be willing to celebrate the Passover, depart en masse from the Empire and cross the Red Sea. They must do it for themselves!

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<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew translated “took notice” implies action – that God, in hearing their pain, decided he had to act to resolve this pain.



So it is that these are the three insights presented in the Exodus story that describe the nature of human liberation – whether personal or corporate, whether spiritual or physical. The will to radicalize the human situation must be steeped in the pain of the people, must imagine existence in a new and different way, and must be willing to act upon it, no matter the cost! This is the way of salvation!

**Exodus 18:1-27** presents a very perceptive passage of scripture regarding how one organizes one's constituency for maximum productivity, the sharing of responsibility and the building of common ownership. It was a valuable lesson for Moses. But it is a valuable lesson for us, as well, as we seek to work for justice in our churches and communities.

In a profound sense, Exodus 18 really belongs to Jethro (Reuel), the priest of Midian and Moses' father-in-law. Moses has led the escaping Israelite slaves toward Mount Sinai, and on the way, he is met by Jethro and his entourage.

The text tells us, "Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came into the wilderness where Moses was encamped at the mountain of God, bringing Moses' sons and wife to him. He sent word to Moses, 'I, your father-in-law Jethro am coming to you, with your wife and her two sons.' Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed down and kissed him; each asked after the other's welfare, and they went into the tent. Then Moses told his father-in-law all that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardships that had beset them on the way, and how the Lord had delivered them" (18:5-8). Of course, Jethro rejoiced in what God had done and blessed Moses in his work. He also returned to Moses his wife and two sons whom Jethro had kept safely while Moses was involved in the risky liberation of Israel.

So the two men meet in joy in seeing each other. And they rejoice in what God has done through Moses. Thus, Jethro affirms Israel's worship of Yahweh, rejoices in Yahweh's deliverance of them from Egyptian slavery, and leads Israel, Moses and Aaron in the worship of God (vss. 10-12). But far more than that occurs through this meeting.

The next day, Jethro watches Moses providing adjudication of Israel, and observes how overwhelmed and how stretched Moses is in the performance of this task. So the wise old priest has some judicial advice to give to Moses.

"So Moses' father-in-law said to Moses, 'What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me, I will give you counsel and God be with you! You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God; teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do. You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and

they will bear the burden with you. If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace” (vss. 17-23).

Moses knew wisdom when he heard it! And he knew he was hearing wisdom from his father-in-law! “So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said. Moses chose able men from all Israel and appointed them as heads over the people, as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. And they judged the people at all times; hard cases they brought to Moses, but any minor case they decided themselves” (vs. 24-26).

What we have here is a division of labor. But far more is going on than simply a division of work! What was really going on was a distribution of power and authority, a sharing of power so that the many might assume responsibility for the whole, rather than the burden lying on the shoulders of just one man. Jethro’s advice will permanently impact the formation of Israel. By appointing judges to take on the adjudication of Israel in the great man’s stead, Moses had lightened his responsibilities, his authority and power had been equitably shared, and “all these people will go to their home in shalom” (vs. 23). Moses recognizes the wisdom of his father-in-law’s advice, and immediately implements it.

In reality, there are five basic elements of people-action laid out in this story – action that Israel applied to itself. First, there was a clear, unmistakable, easily articulated problem. “What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning to evening” (vs. 14)? The problem was obvious. Moses was trying to do too much! And the result was that he was frustrated (and exhausted) by the sheer volume of work he faced. And the people were not being adequately served. Both he and the people were suffering. And the result was that justice was being carried out very spasmodically – if at all!

Change cannot occur in a church, a neighborhood, a community or a city or region unless both those who are called to provide leadership and the people can together clearly perceive there is a major problem that must be addressed. They may not know all the nuances of the problem, nor do they necessarily have all the data upon which to articulate that problem – but they know there is a problem! As the people and leaders organize to address those concerns, one of their first tasks will be to learn as much as they can about that problem – even becoming greater experts about it than the so-called “experts”. But it begins with the strong conviction on everybody’s part that something is drastically wrong.

The second essential element presented in this story is anger! No one will be motivated to work intensely and intentionally on a great “dis-ease” unless that very matter makes them angry! Anger is the single most important emotion for change to occur. And anger, although it is not clearly stated in the story, permeates the story – for Moses’ is upset and exhausted, the people are frustrated, and even Jethro is concerned. Anger permeates the story. And it is their respective anger that causes Moses to heed Jethro’s advice, and for the people selected by Moses to be the “able men who fear God, are trustworthy and hate dishonest gain” and will become the “officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens”. But what is anger?

The English word “anger” comes from the Norse word, *angor*. That word is best translated into the English word, “grief”! That is, authentic anger is the action of grieving over

the injustice our people are facing, and connecting that injustice with the pain we have experienced in our own lives. All of us have experienced injustice when we were dominated, oppressed or exploited in ways that diminished our sense of self-worth and self-respect. Those incidents may be overwhelming – such as Israel’s oppression under Egyptian slavery. Or the incident engendering such feelings may seem trivial to someone else – like being made to clean up someone else’s mess at summer camp. But whether trivial or overwhelming, that anger at being diminished is as real as real can be! So it was for the Israelites who felt they were getting only a slight hearing or no hearing at all from a besieged Moses. So they felt minimized! And they were angry with Moses! Moses was angry at the frustration of his limited response! And even Jethro was angry at what he saw the people being put through, and what Moses was putting himself through because he didn’t know what else he could do!

The third element was a trained and sophisticated pool of leaders who could assume responsibility if given that option. A trained and sophisticated leadership is key. Without them, the few in charge are severely limited in what they are actually able to accomplish. With a secondary level of leadership below them, however, they will be able to do a great deal.

But such leadership can’t truly be leaders unless they are trained and honed into being leaders! Thus, Jethro tells Moses, “You should look for able men (and women) among all (the people), those who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain. Teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do” (vss. 21, 20). Thus, effective organizing includes searching for leaders – finding people who show the potential of becoming effective leaders – people “who fear God, are trustworthy and hate dishonest gain”. They may not know much and they may have little experience. But experience and knowledge can be learned! The real question is whether these are people of integrity! All the rest you can teach them!

And that is in reality what Moses did. He taught these leaders the Law. He taught them “the statutes and ordinances” of Israel (the shorthand term used throughout the Torah to refer to the system of laws which implemented the covenant between God and Israel around the Ten Commandments) and, thus, “the things they are to do (as judges and officers)”.

The fourth element in Jethro’s recommendation to Moses was the creation and nurturing of allies to work with him in the organizing of Israel. The effective exercise of power almost always needs allies as an integral part of that exercise. Without allies, one stands alone. With allies, one has replicated one’s self a hundred or even thousands of times over! You can work together to achieve common goals that neither of you could do alone (as one person once put it to me, “You don’t have to have a common belief in the Virgin Birth in order to build housing for the homeless”)!

This is what Moses did as a result of Jethro’s advice. He built an alliance for the adjudication of Israel. And for that alliance to be successful, it required two sets of allies. It required “(those) who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain”. In other words, it required nascent leaders who would be willing to be trained for leadership. But it also required the cooperation of the people. “They judged the people at all times” (vs. 26). The people had to be willing to be judged by their contemporaries, rather than by Moses. Without the people’s

willingness to accept the judgment of their neighbors selected to be judges, the proposal couldn't have worked! People might be disappointed that Moses wasn't hearing their case. But they had to be willing to accept that someone down the street whom they had known all their life-long had been perceived by Moses as capable of leadership and had been trained by him in the "statutes and ordinances" of the people so that they could now distinguish between "jot and tittle" and make the right decision regarding their case. Without allies, no resolution of the problem could have occurred.

The final element in this effort to re-organize the nation of Israel was the emergence of a new level and form of leadership – a leadership that could carry that nation after Moses' had died, a leadership that would guide that nation for the next 3,000 years! This element, of course, was only later realized. The other elements were necessary parts of the actual implementation of Moses' re-organization of the life of Israel. Once activated, they became crystal-clear elements in the transformation of Israel. But this final element only became apparent over the passage of time, as these newly-selected local people proved themselves capable of being both wise judges and strong leaders, and as Israel slowly built a decision-making, adjudicating and action-taking pattern for its development as a nation over generations and even millennia of time!

What we actually have here in this story is an initial application of the Iron Rule of organizing – "Never do for others what they can do for themselves". What we have here is the clear action of a people's leaders and the people themselves to identify and articulate the matters that most thwarted their life together as a people, the willingness to be angry about it and to use that anger to work constructively together to solve that dilemma, the selection and building of a sophisticated and trained pool of leaders, the willingness to cooperate together by everybody becoming allies to make this system work, and the emergence of a new level and form of leadership. What we have here is an organizing of the people that distributes power – that develops in many, many leaders and in the people the capacity, ability and willingness to act for the common good. Thus, in this story, Israel organizes its life together in a way that guarantees the continued development of a core of leadership and a freeing of itself from the continued performance of a single individual. And by instituting these changes, Israel takes the first steps towards the formation of a nation based upon the sharing of power on the part of the many rather than the concentration of power in the hands of a self-selected few (the Egyptian model). And that, in turn, allows Israel to take the first steps towards the eventual formation of an authentic democracy.

### **LEVITICUS 16:1—17:15; 25:1-55; 26:1-46**

**Leviticus 16:1—17:15** presents the rituals for the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the first time this ceremony appears in Hebrew literature. The third book of the Torah, Leviticus is the primary presentation of the Torah and is used even today within the Jewish community to introduce children to the basic elements of Jewish faith. The name, "Leviticus" is actually the Greek title of this book, *Levitikon*, which means "things Levitical" or "priestly things". Since the priests in ancient Israel were of the tribe of Levi (thus, they were "Levites"), and this book is in essence a manual for the priestly worship of God by Israel, it was natural to name the book "Leviticus".

One of the most important “holy days” (“holidays”) presented in Leviticus was Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement. Yom Kippur is a “fast” day – the only day of a fast in the Jewish year prescribed by Mosaic Law. Its rites are set in Leviticus 16-17, but are also restated in Lev. 23:26-32 and Numbers 29:7-11. It was a sabbatical day – that is, a day of solemn observance and rest from labor so that one could focus upon one’s sins and one’s need for atonement (Num. 29:7, Ezek. 43:7-8 and 48:35; Acts 27:9). Leviticus 16:1-17:15 presents to the reader the origins and regulations of the Jewish Day of Atonement.

The ritual of the Day of Atonement was built around two goats – one that was sacrificed (along with other animals) and its blood shed to grant forgiveness of sins, the other which had the people’s sins laid upon it and was taken into the wilderness where it was abandoned to wander, carrying the burden of the people’s sins.

“(The priest) shall take the two goats and set them before the Lord at the entrance of the tent of meeting; and Aaron shall cast lots on the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for Azazel. Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the Lord, and offer it as a sin-offering; but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the Lord to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel. . . . Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness” (16:7-10, 21-22).

Removal of the sins of the people of Israel required two actions, Leviticus tells us. One goat needed to be slain and its blood “poured out” to atone for the people’s sin (see below); that goat was to be sacrificed to Yahweh. The second goat was to remain alive, but the sins of the people would be placed upon it and it would carry the weight of those sins out into the wilderness where it would be set free to wander; in this way, that second goat was to be “sacrificed” to “Azazel”! Tradition gave to this goat the name of “scapegoat” (from the Middle English *escapen* or *scapen*, which means an innocent who bears the blame of other people’s misdeeds).

The point that Leviticus is making is this: unjust or oppressive action demands repentance. As a friend of mine use to put it, “You can’t hurt a child of God and get away with it!” What he meant by that is that the very act of “hurting” someone (i.e., acting unjustly, oppressively, exploitively, rejecting or marginalizing someone) hurts the one who commits that act! Something happens inside you when you keep on hurting others. You become less of a human being than you were before you committed such a crime. You pay a price for your own evil actions. Therefore, unless a price is paid for your misdeeds (in the Hebrew case, the breaking of any of the Ten Commandments), you will not experience redemption and spiritual release for those misdeeds. You carry the results of your own exploitive action with you for the remainder of your life, and it becomes a cancer eating away at you! Therefore, God must act to free you from the consequences of your own action. And that action comes at the price of another’s life (in this case, the sacrificed goat), and in the burdening of another (the scapegoat).

First, what Leviticus 16-17 teaches us is that sin is not simply the naughty things you do that can be lightly dismissed. Sin against others, yourself or God leaves a profound scar that destroys your wholeness and the one that you sinned against. And unless the community has some way of releasing itself from the heavy burden of our accumulated sin, we will only sink deeper and deeper into our own morass.

The second insight into this atoning action of Yom Kippur is that the action is not solely for the forgiveness of individual sin. Consider the instructions for this atoning action: “Aaron shall make atonement for himself *and for his household*” (16:6, 11), “Aaron shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering that is *for the people*” (vs. 15), “he shall make atonement because of *the uncleanness of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins*” (vs. 16; also see vss. 17, 21-22). This work of atonement is a corporate work. That is, it is atonement for the actions of a community (household, the people) and for sins that are corporate in nature as well as individualistic.

This is particularly captured in the recognition that Yom Kippur was to be an integral part of the observance of the Sabbatical. “For on this day atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the Lord. *It is a Sabbath of complete rest to you, and you shall deny yourselves; it is a statute forever*” (16:30-31). We will examine the Sabbatical observances more fully in our examination of Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15 (the two major legislative actions on the Sabbatical day, month, year and the sabbatical or sabbatical years or Jubilee). But, in essence, the sabbatical was the primary social legislation of Israel that dealt with the resting of the people from labor, the worship of God, the resting of the land from farming, the freeing of slaves, the forgiveness of debts and the redistribution of the wealth of Israel. It is Israel’s (and our) refusal to be faithful to the full sabbatical requirements that constitutes the primary sin of Israel, a sin so severe that it must require the shedding of innocent blood and the laying of the weight of that sin upon the innocent for redemption to authentically take place.

The third insight from Yom Kippur is built off the recognition that the goat that is sacrificed for the sins of the people is sacrificed to Yahweh. But the goat that takes on the burden of the people’s sin, the “scapegoat”, is to “be presented alive before the Lord to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel” (16:10). But what is the author of Leviticus talking about? Who or what is Azazel? And why should the scapegoat be dedicated to Azazel?

We do not know what Leviticus is talking about in its reference to Azazel. This is the only place in the scripture where the word is used. There are three attempted explanations for this reference. The first was the view of the translators of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, the Septuagint (i.e., “LXX”, which was translated in the middle of the third century BCE). The LXX does not translate the Hebrew “Azazel” as a proper noun but as “the goat that is banished” or “the goat that is removed”. Thus, the LXX translators didn’t see this reference as referring to an individual other than Yahweh, but rather as a reference to the scapegoat itself. However, their perspective doesn’t hold much credence today.

A second explanation for the word, “Azazel”, is that it denotes the place to which the scapegoat was taken and abandoned. Thus, consider the statement “The goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented before the Lord, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel” (vs. 10). Using this explanation, the sentence is read to suggest that the goat wasn’t presented “to” the being named “Azazel” but “sent to” the location named “Azazel” (however, one will have a harder time reading 16:8 and 26 that way). This was the view of most of the rabbinic scholars.

The third explanation, and the one held by most biblical scholars today, is that Azazel was a mythical demon inhabiting the desert – and thus, a prototype of Satan. Although there is no biblical support for this or any of the other two views, it does have the support of Enoch 10:4. Enoch is a popular extrabiblical book published about 100 years before the birth of Jesus quoted in the New Testament book of Jude 14-15 and referenced in both the Gospel of John and Revelation. In Enoch 10:4, Azazel appears as a ringleader of rebel angels who seduce humanity. So this reference suggests that the person of Azazel was a recognized demonic creature in Hebrew writing in the two centuries preceding Jesus of Nazareth. Whether one can extend that mythology back to the book of Leviticus written 600-1200 years earlier (according to one’s dating preferences), is another question.

Whichever understanding of Azazel one chooses to hold (the goat that is banished, a desert place or a demon inhabiting the desert), Leviticus 16 is suggesting that both individual and corporate sin, both the wrong that we do and the injustice, exploitation and marginalization that a society practices requires forgiveness. It requires forgiveness because it is an offense of God, God’s law and God’s intentions for the humanity that God has created. But it also requires forgiveness because it is an offense against humanity as well. It is an offense that deserves banishment from the human family. It is an offense that destroys the very environment and society in which we need to live. And it is an offense that is so deep and so all-encompassing that it is as if it were almost demonic. And such an offense requires more than just forgiveness. It requires paying a price. It requires atonement! That is the nature of sin!

Thus it is that Leviticus’ description of the need for atonement that is symbolized by the solemn observance of Yom Kippur ends with the necessary act of expiation.

“This is what the Lord has commanded. If anyone of the house of Israel slaughters an ox or a lamb or a goat in the camp, or slaughters it outside the camp, and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to present it as an offering to the Lord before the tabernacle of the Lord, he shall be held guilty of bloodshed; he has shed blood” (17:2b-4).

Any animal that is slaughtered, Leviticus tells us, must be slaughtered as a sacrifice to God. Even though that slaughtered animal may be slaughtered to provide a family its food or for its hide for clothing or shoes, it must be slaughtered “before the Lord”. That is because you are taking its life! And that is not a light thing.

The same stands true for the shedding of blood. “If anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens who reside among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut that person off from the people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I

have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement” (17:10-11).

Thus, the celebration of Yom Kippur, the slaughter of the goat that bears the people’s sins and the exiling of the scapegoat and, in fact, the slaughter of any animal, is more than simply killing a beast for food. The life of the animal is in its blood; so the capacity for atonement lies in that blood.

It is therefore in the origins of Yom Kippur and the sacrificial system of Israel’s worship of Yahweh that we see the origins of the concept of sacrificial atonement. This is the beginning of the development of the concept that will eventually result for Christians in the positing of Jesus’ death as a sacrificial atonement – the concept that it was his blood shed for humanity that atones us. “For it is the blood that makes atonement”.

Thus, a theology of atonement is birthed in these Levitical chapters!

**Leviticus 25:1-55.** The famed chapter of Jubilee – Leviticus 25 – begins with the commanding of the observance of the Sabbatical Year (25:1-7). However, unlike Deuteronomy 15, it lays out only one stipulation – a stipulation not recorded in Deuteronomy – that the land must lie fallow. Deuteronomy stresses the sabbatical year as a time for the forgiveness of all debts and the freeing of slaves. That doesn’t appear in Leviticus until the Year of Jubilee legislation. Between Deuteronomy and Leviticus, therefore, we gain the full parameters of the sabbatical year and see if fully for what it was – the means for redistribution of the nation’s wealth!

Leviticus 25:8-55 develop the sabbatical of the sabbatical years – the year of Jubilee. This is the most astounding legislation in scripture.

“You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month – on the Day of Atonement – you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you” (25:8-10a)!

The sabbatical of the sabbatical years will be a year of Jubilee! This legislation is meant to reverse the accumulation of fortunes, so that no family could build excessive wealth but rather that the nation’s wealth would be redistributed every fifty years.

But it is particularly intriguing to note when in the liturgical year Jubilee was to be proclaimed. It was to be celebrated on Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement! It is recognized that Jubilee must happen on the day that Israel is particularly to confess its national, family and individual sin, and is to take action to atone for that sin (see Leviticus 16). The Jubilee, therefore, is seen as an act of atonement, as Israel repents of its own greed and penchant for exploitation!



Further, in the blowing of the “trumpet” (actually, “ram’s horn”), “you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.” This verse, found on the Liberty Bell, was perceived by the founding fathers of the USA as political liberation. But in Israel, it was economic liberation that was happening. Israel’s recognition was that you can’t have political liberation unless you have economic liberation – that as long as there is an accumulation of wealth in the hands of the rich and the exclusion of the poor from that bounty, all your political liberty is a charade. Liberation must be economic as well as political, and that requires a periodic redistribution of wealth. That is what the Jubilee was designed to accomplish in Israel!

The first stipulation of Jubilee is a continuation of Leviticus’ understanding of the sabbatical year. The land is to lie fallow (25:11-12, 18-22).

“That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you; you shall eat only what the field itself produces” (vss. 11-12).

Why would there be a command to let the land lie fallow? It must be remembered that, at this period in the development of the human race, there was neither the development of chemical fertilizers nor the knowledge of soil restoration through the rotation of crops. Therefore, the only way that farmed land could be restored would be to let the land lie fallow for a year while putting animal dung on it to renew it. Thus, the command to let the land lie fallow was in the best interest of both the worker and the owner of that land. But since letting it lie fallow meant that such land would be taken out of production and therefore could not be turned into wealth, it would represent a financial loss. The likelihood, therefore, would be that even though they would know that it would be in their own long term best interest to let the land lie fallow once every seven years, people would not be willing to assume the financial loss it would mean to them. Consequently, without legislation to the contrary, people would work and work their land until its productivity was depleted and it was good only “to be cast out and trodden under foot”!

So a part of the sabbatical year legislation was to require the land to lie fallow every seven years. But if the seventh in a series of sabbatical years was to be declared a jubilee which was to be celebrated on the fiftieth year (as prescribed by Leviticus), then you’re actually talking about doing no farming for two consecutive years (the 49<sup>th</sup> and the 50<sup>th</sup> years). A family might be able to survive one year with no income or food production. But two years? How would people keep from mass starvation with no income or food production for two consecutive years? It doesn’t seem very practical.

But Leviticus is ready for that argument. The writer responds to such a question, “I (the Lord God) will order my blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it will yield a crop for three years. When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating from the old crop (while the new crop is growing); until the ninth year, when its produce comes in, you shall eat the old” (vss. 21-22).

The primary principle being developed here is the principle of mutual stewardship – Israel’s stewardship of the land and God’s stewardship of Israel. Such stewardship is built around the liturgy of abundance – the reality that God is a fecund and promiscuous God,

showering his people with abundance. The question of sufficiency asked by Israel (vs. 20) is based upon the myth of scarcity – that there never is enough to go around. But what God wants out of Israel is for them to embrace a liturgy of abundance (“the cup is half full”) rather than a myth of scarcity (“the cup is half empty”). If one obeys the laws of God – including the very practical law of giving land a Sabbath rest so that it may renew itself – then one will always have an abundance. The issue is put very squarely by God:

“You shall observe my statutes and faithfully keep my ordinances, so that you may live on the land securely. The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and live on it securely” (vss. 18-19).

God will supply all our needs if we live in the sensible people- and society-caring and environment-protecting way God wants us to live. We will always have more than enough if we do not try to hoard more than what we actually need!

The second regulation of Jubilee presented in Leviticus 25, however, is the legislation peculiar to Leviticus – the most radical legislation one could ever imagine.

“The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land” (Lev. 25:23-24).

This is, in reality, a legislated reversal of fortune! It is decreeing that, no matter what the circumstances, the land is to be returned to its original owners every fifty years. Since wealth was primarily in the land, such a regulation guaranteed that both wealth and the source of that wealth (the land) could not accrue in perpetuity in the hands of the rich, but would be intentionally and systematically redistributed to the people every fifty years by returning that land to its hereditary owners. Then, once restored, “in this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property” (25:13).

The regulation hails back to Joshua’s conquest of Canaan. After the conquest, every tribe was granted a selected portion of conquered Canaan. Each tribe then divided the land between all its families (Joshua 19:49-51; 24:13-21; e.g., Joshua 13:8—19:48). That land became each family’s “birthright”, the land they were promised in perpetuity – so that the wealth of land had been evenly distributed to all the families of Israel. And since it was impossible, in later generations, not to be a descendant of one of those families, that land in turn would continue to be your family’s land. That was the economic foundation upon which the economy, politics and culture of Israel was built.

Leviticus 25, therefore, does two things. First, it re-asserts the basic principle of a redistribution of wealth to all the families of Israel ever fifty years so that you begin every 51<sup>st</sup> year with an economic “level playing field”. Second, it lays out the regulations regarding the disposal of the land between the Jubilees.

The assumption is that once you received your birthright land again, you would cultivate and farm it, using it as your economic base for the next 49 years. But that is Israelite society as it

would ideally be, Leviticus recognizes. In the real world, it is not as simple as that. The fact is that some people have stunning capacity to make money, while others do not and are soon at the disadvantage with those who do. So Leviticus pronounces regulations that must be followed between jubilees regarding the use and distribution of one's birthright land.

First, if you need to "sell" your land, you and the potential buyer are to calculate the worth of that land by determining the number of harvests that land will yield between its day of sale and the next jubilee (because at the next jubilee, the new "owner" will have to return the land free-of-charge and free-and-clear to the family for whom it is their birthright) (25:14-17). A price tag is to be placed on a harvest, multiplied by the anticipated number of harvests – and *that* shall be the price the "buyer" pays for the land. "You shall not cheat one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am the Lord your God" (25:17).

During the 49-year interim between jubilees, a kinsman can at any time purchase back the land from the new "owner" for the price of the remaining harvests (not the original purchase price) (v. 25). If the "seller" prospers, he can also purchase it back on the same terms (vv. 26-27). Otherwise, the land is to be returned to him at no price and free-and-clear at the next jubilee (v. 28).

"Land" does not include property owned in walled cities. That can be sold in perpetuity to its proposed owners. Only land that is "birthright" land (and that includes the land in villages that are not walled – because such villages "grew up" on someone's land) is jubilee-protected land that must be returned to its birthright owner (vv. 29-31).

Finally, the one exception to these rules is those for the tribe of Levi. The Levites were not given any birthright land at the time of the Joshuan conquest because their responsibility was ministry at the Temple. Therefore, *any* land any Levite owns – including a house or property in a walled city – is "birthright land" to them, and thus is "Jubilee" land; it shall be released to them at the time of Jubilee (25: 32-34).

The third requirement of the jubilee was the forgiveness of debts. This was also a sabbatical year requirement, although that is not stipulated in Leviticus' limited interpretation of the sabbatical year (25:1-7). However, it is clearly stipulated in Deuteronomy 15:2-3 as a requirement of the sabbatical year.

The Jubilee remission of debts has two elements to it.

First, between the jubilees, no one who was owed a debt by another is to charge either advance interest or accrued interest (Lev. 25:35-38). In fact, as one who has given a loan or who has otherwise advanced money or property or goods to another, you are forbidden to make any profit off that investment at all (25:36). You are not even to sell food at a profit to you – or to anyone, for that matter (vs. 37). And why? Well, why would a person come to you for a loan or for an advancement? They would do so only if they are in need. And how dare you make a profit off of the plight or the need of another?

Second, if the principal of a loan or advancement has not been paid off by the jubilee, then you are to forgive the loan in its entirety at jubilee time (25:40). The stipulation is the same in Deuteronomy for the sabbatical year. And why are you to carry out a remission of the debts of every Israelite beholden to you? The author of Leviticus gives the rationale for such action:

“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God” (25:38).

What Leviticus does in providing the rationale for remitting all debts and taking no interest is to remind the Israelites that the very land they own was not purchased by them or even conquered by them. It was given to them by God as a free gift. All that they have, all that they possess is a sign to them of God’s grace who freely and without obligation gave it to them. So the principle is “Freely you have received; freely you are to give away”. The abundance of God showered unstintingly upon you is to evoke a liturgy of abundance from you. So do not think in terms of making a profit off the financial misfortunes of another. Rather, give as freely as you have been given; forgive debts as freely as God has forgiven your debts. As Dom Helder Camara puts it, “Seeing you a prodigal and open-handed giver, let me give unstintingly . . . like God’s own”.<sup>6</sup>

The final stipulation of Jubilee pertains to slaves and bound laborers. On the year of Jubilee, they are to be set free from their bondage (Deuteronomy also requires this as a sabbatical year regulation [15:12-18], but Leviticus does not). Again, Leviticus presents all possible contingencies for this release, so that there is no loop-hole that provides the opportunity to ignore this regulation.

First, if the person in servitude is a Hebrew, here are the regulations (25:39-43). Technically, the Hebrew is not a slave but is a “hired or bound laborer” – the difference being that a “hired” laborer can quit while a “bound” laborer is contracted to the land-owner for a designated period of time. In either case, one enters into such an estate by becoming impoverished and selling one’s self to the Hebrew owner. They can only be “purchased” until the year of Jubilee. Then they must be set free and return both to their family and their ancestral property.

The second contingency is those who are not Hebrews and who sell themselves to Hebrews. These do become slaves and remain the property of the Hebrew owner in perpetuity. They are not set free at Jubilee, but can be inherited as slaves by the owner’s descendants (25:44-46).

The third contingency is Hebrews who sell themselves to aliens who are residents in Israel (25:47-55). In that scenario, the Hebrew slaves are to be set free on the Jubilee year.

If a person who is “owned” by one wishes his freedom before the Jubilee, he can have it by paying his owner back the price the owner paid for him, minus the number of years he served that owner. Each year that slave served, his owner is obligated to reduce his “purchase-back” price by 1/49<sup>th</sup> (25:48-52).

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<sup>6</sup> Dom Helder Camara, *The Desert is Fertile* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1974), p. 15.

Finally, no matter which scenario it is by which one may own slaves or bound laborers, the owners are to treat them well. They “shall not rule with harshness over those in one’s care” (25:53).

This concludes the regulations regarding the Jubilee – an absolutely-amazing piece of social legislation designed to rebalance the economics of Israel once every 49 years so that wealth cannot accrue and power concentrate in the hands of a favored few, but must be distributed evenly to all people!

**Leviticus 26:1-46** is a remarkable passage. It lays out the choices standing before Israel and the consequences of each choice. The choice is to “follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully” (26:3), or to “not obey me and do not observe all these commandments, (but to) spurn my statutes and abhor my ordinances” (26:14-15). If you choose to follow God, then you and your nation and tribe will be blessed (26:3-13). If you do not, then severe trouble will come upon you (26:14-39).

“If, in spite of these punishments you have not turned back to me, but continue hostile to me, then I too will continue hostile to you; I myself will strike you sevenfold for your sins” (vss. 23-24).

What is most remarkable about this prophecy, however, is the author’s understanding of the sabbatical implications of God’s action in the face of Israel’s refusal to embrace its law.

“I will devastate the land, so that your enemies will come to settle in it shall be appalled at it. And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword against you; your land shall be a desolation, and your cities a waste. Then the land shall enjoy its Sabbath years as long as it lies desolate, while you are in the land of your enemies; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its Sabbath years. As long as it lies desolate, it shall have the rest it did not have on your Sabbaths when you were living on it” (26:32-35).

The question, of course, was when Leviticus was written. If one embraces the Mosaic authorship of Leviticus, it would be around 1200 BCE. That would make this prophecy remarkable, because Moses could see that Israel was to be in Babylonian exile by 586 BCE.

If, on the other hand, one embraces a post-Exilic compilation of the Hebrew Law Code and liturgical worship and an editing into a final manuscript, it is still remarkable! It is remarkable because it is a compilation over 600 years of gradual formation of a liturgical tradition. But it is even more remarkable that the authors (whether Mosaic, pre- or post-exilic) would interpret the defeat and subjugation of Israel by the Babylonians as a *sabbatical* event (see II Chronicles 36:17-21). That such defeat and consequent abandonment of the land would be seen as the consequence of the nation’s refusal to practice the sabbatical year is a powerful image for theologically reinterpreting the exile. From this theological perspective, that exile is not simply the political reality that happened to Israel, but Israel’s punishment for its unfaithfulness.

And because of its decimation as a nation, it would be granted the Sabbath rest it refused to take due to its lust for greed and control! It is a most profound symbol for spiritual disobedience!

## **NUMBERS 6:24-26; 13:1—14:45; 26:31—27:11; 29:1-38**

**Numbers 6:24-26.** Numbers is the fourth of the five books of the Pentateuch or Torah. It consists of three intertwined elements. The most prominent element is the record of a census taken of Israel at the close of its 40-year sojourn in the wilderness, as it made ready for entrance into the Promised Land; these listings are why the book is entitled “Numbers”. A second element is the history of Israel after it departs Mount Sinai following the giving of the Ten Commandments, and up to the arrival of Israel at the borders of the Promised Land 40 years later. The third element is that of legal stipulations that complement the Hebrew Law presented prominently in both the books of Exodus and Leviticus and summarized in the book of Deuteronomy.

Numbers 6:24-26 is one of the best-known prayers found in the Bible: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you shalom”.

This poem-prayer actually deals with God’s intentions for the religion of a community, a city or a nation. When one first reads this prayer, one immediately concludes that it is an individual prayer – that I am to be blessed and kept. But the context makes it clear that this is a prayer for all of Israel. It begins with an instruction to Aaron and his sons to bless all Israel (Numbers 6:22-23), and concludes with the words, “So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them” (6:27). This is a prayer for a nation, not for its individuals!

In essence, what this prayer communicates is that the indicator of a “right religion” in a society is whether it brings people and the society itself into an active, dynamic relationship with God. God wants to bless, keep, and be present and gracious to the people, so that God’s shalom comes upon them. God’s primary intention is that humanity be in an ongoing relationship with God. What God wants is a relational society built around his love relationship with us.

So how do we know that a community is truly living in shalom? The primary indicator is whether or not the people exhibit a dynamic, personal relationship with God that is manifested in their relationships with each other and their just actions in maintaining an equitable society free of poverty.

**Numbers 13:1-14:45** is the well-known story of the Israelite reconnaissance party into Canaan. After meeting with God on Mount Sinai and imparting both the covenant and the Ten Commandments to the people, Moses led the Israelites through the Sinai desert to the land of Canaan. After that journey of a few months, the Israelites were immediately south of Canaan, with plans to invade the Promised Land from its south. But before they invaded, they needed to send a reconnaissance party into the land to spy out the defenses of the people who lived there in order to plan the best route of attack.

So it is that the reconnaissance party steals into the land of Canaan. The party consists of twelve selected men – one from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Among that scouting party are two men who will figure prominently in the future of Israel – Caleb and Joshua.

The party is in the land for “forty days” while the nation of Israel waits hidden in the wilderness south of Canaan. Forty days later, the spies return, both with their report and with a sample of the abundant land’s produce. They report to Moses and “the congregation of Israelites” that the land is, indeed, a promised land – abundant and fertile, “flowing with milk and honey”. But it is also a well-fortified land with stout walls, city strongholds, large fighting armies and – worst of all – those armies are made up of giants (the “Nephilim”). The conclusion of most of the scouting party is that it would be both foolhardy and suicidal for Israel to attack such superior forces. Israel’s defeat would be inevitable.

Caleb and Joshua differ with their fellow spies. This land has been promised to Israel by God, they retorted. Would God promise that which he could not deliver? He freed Israel from Pharaoh’s tyranny and destroyed the Egyptian army at the Red Sea. Could he not bring major victory to Israel’s troops, if they acted in faithfulness to God’s promise? Therefore, why be intimidated by stout walls and giant armies?

It is intriguing to note the two perspectives put forward by this scouting party. One portion of the party, in essence, concentrated upon the difficulties of the operation, acting in a conservative manner. The other portion of the party (Caleb and Joshua) focused on the opportunity, taking God’s promise seriously. The argument of the scouting party was based upon a cautious, prudent evaluation of the available data. Caleb and Joshua’s argument was based upon the promises of God, not an objective assessment of the situation.

What would the people choose to do? Would they have faith in the promises of God? Or would they be ruled by their pragmatism? The answers to those questions are given in Numbers 14!

Numbers 14 concludes the story of the twelve Israelite spies who go into Canaan to scope it out for attack. What will they do? Israel chooses to act with prudence rather than out of trust in God’s promise; so they accept the advice of the ten spies and reject the message of Caleb and Joshua. Moses and Aaron plead with the people to obey God’s command to them, but the people will not reverse their decision (14:5-10). Then God speaks to Moses and Aaron, and declares that Israel will be punished for their faithlessness (14:26-35). For each day that the Israelite spies stayed in the land – 40 days – Israel will stay a year in the wilderness. Only after their 40 year exile is completed, will God allow them to enter Canaan!

Faced with God’s dramatic sentence that Israel will have to wander in the wilderness for 40 years, the people reverse themselves and invade Canaan (14:36-45). But now they are taking action without the protection of Yahweh! Moses and Aaron strongly oppose such action, refusing to let the Ark of the Covenant go before Israel into battle. The result is a smashing defeat at the hands of the Amalekites and Canaanites. So it is that Israel is driven into exile. The nation now begins its 40-year sojourn in the wilderness.

In this story, what becomes abundantly clear is the profound damage done to Israel by being a final generation of slaves in Egypt. It was not only that the Israelites were physically marginalized, politically oppressed and economically exploited by the Egyptians. It was that they were spiritually and psychologically enslaved, as well. Their spirit had been enslaved. As the result of hundreds upon hundreds of years of slavery, these former slaves lack the boldness and the self-assertiveness to take risk – and especially the risk of warfare! They would rather opt for the security of enslavement (where they might live in oppressive and exploitive conditions, but it would at least be predictable) than the insecurity found in taking the risk of battle. In a most profound way, Moses discovered that it was far easier to take Israel out of Egypt than it was to take Egypt out of Israel! For when a people is psychologically and spiritually enslaved, then they are truly enslaved indeed!

So it was that Israel would have to stay in the desert until that generation that had been born in slavery had died off, to be replaced by a generation of Israelites born in and hardened by the desert. It would take 40 years for that “die-off” to be completed, with only Joshua and Caleb surviving (not even Moses would survive) to lead a new Israel into the conquest of the Promised Land. Thus, Israel sealed its own fate, and returned to the wilderness to begin its 40-year sojourn there.

The Israelites’ experience in this situation is not an exception, but a primary indicator of human (and even Christian) prudence. As the president of the college I attended used to put it, “Faint heart never begins great venture nor wins fair maiden!” Because Egypt is so deeply within us, we often allow ourselves to be intimidated with the challenge before us to work for justice, rather than to focus on the call of God to us. Or, like the Israelites who heard God’s verdict upon their caution and threw caution to the wind in order to attack the Canaanites and to thus taste defeat, we act precipitously when God is not in it. The task for the Christian is to perceive God’s call and then act faithfully upon it, rather than being intimidated by prudence or taking precipitate action through a false confidence.

**Numbers 26:31—27:11** is both a statement of the census of the Israelite nation and, on the eve of the invasion of the Promised Land, a remarkable adjudication that flew in the face of all the rules and expectations of that nation.

The census of the people occurs before they begin the invasion of Canaan. The nation consists of 601,730 fighting men from the twelve tribes (26:31), along with 23,000 Levitical priests and temple stewards (26:62). There are several interesting things we learn from the record of this census, however, in addition to the numbering of the people.

First, we discover that the name of the father and mother of Moses were Amran and Jochebed (vss. 58-59). They are not named in the family account of Exodus 2, but that is their names. This text also confirms that Miriam and Aaron are Moses’ sister and brother.

Second, the census notes that “among (those enrolled), there were not one of those enrolled by Moses and Aaron the priest, who had enrolled the Israelites in the wilderness of



Sinai. For the Lord had said of them, ‘They shall die in the wilderness.’ Not one of them were left, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua, son of Nun” (26:64-65). God had been true to his word!

Finally, the purpose of this numbering was not simply to ascertain the fighting strength of Israel. It was also to determine how the land was to be apportioned (26:52-56) once Israel had occupied the land. This, in turn, was the beginning or initiating of every Israelite family’s birthright that would, consequently, form the base of Israel’s continuing equitable distribution of wealth under the law of Jubilee. The allotment of land in Numbers 26 is done solely on the size of the tribe and clan (26:54-56). It was not allotted according to power, wealth or even status in Israel. The particular tribal assignment would be determined by lot (the “roll of the dice”); the size of the allotment was to be determined by the population of the tribe. Thus, from the very beginning, the economic and political structure of Israel was determined in a way that guaranteed an equitable distribution of wealth!

It is within this context of the equitable distribution of land to the male heir of each family of each tribe, that a notable exception is recorded. The story of the daughters of Zelophehad is a most remarkable story. Zelophehad had died, and had no male heirs. His five daughters came to Moses and said, “Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father’s brothers” (27:4).

Moses brought the matter before the Lord, and God concurred with the daughters’ request. “The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying,” God concluded. “You shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father’s brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them” (27:7). This is absolutely remarkable, because the Israelites are here creating economic justice for women as well as men. They, too, become both receivers and protectors of Israel’s birthright. Such a thing had never been heard of before – either in Israel or in any other Near Eastern country!

Further, legislation is instituted which passes on both liquid wealth and birthright land. Upon the death of the man, Moses adjudicated, his wealth goes to his eldest son. If there is no living son, it is to go to his daughter. If there is no living son or daughter, it is to go to the man’s brothers. If there are no brothers, then it is to go to his uncle (his father’s brother). If there is no uncle, then it is to go “to the nearest kinsman of his clan” (27:8-11). This is to be “a statute and ordinance” of Israel. The justice within the equitable distribution of wealth laid out here in Numbers is absolutely astounding!

**Numbers 29:1-38.** If, in Hebrew legislation, every seventh day is a Sabbath, every seventh year a sabbatical year and every seven seventh year a Jubilee, then it stands to reason that there would be a seventh-month sabbatical. Yet that sabbatical month is found nowhere in scripture – except here in Numbers 29! And a most intriguing sabbatical it is.

“On the first day of the seventh month you shall have a holy convocation; you shall not work at your occupations. It is a day for you to blow the trumpets, and you shall offer a burnt offering, a pleasing odor to the Lord” (29:1-2a).

The sabbatical month is divided into three segments. The month is introduced by a “holy convocation” in the “first day of the seventh month”, with the sacrifice of one bull, one ram, seven lambs, grain offerings, and one male goat for a sin offering “to make atonement for you” (presumably for your personal and corporate [social] sins of the previous months). Then offerings are done in addition to “the regular burnt offering and its grain offering, and their drink offerings” (29:6).

Then, similar ceremonies are held on the tenth day (vss. 7-14) and the fifteenth day (vss. 12-38) of the sabbatical month. The fifteenth day convocation is different than the others in two ways. First, it is a multi-day convocation, from the fifteenth through the 22<sup>nd</sup> day. Second, rather than one bull being sacrificed, it is twelve bulls on the fifteenth day, reducing by one bull each day until the 22<sup>nd</sup> day, where it returns to one bull. Otherwise, the ceremony and the convocation is the same.

The focus of the Sabbath day is on each person’s and each family’s worship of God. The focus of the Sabbatical year is on justice: justice for slaves, those with debts and justice for the land (so that it can be restored through rest). The focus of the Jubilee (the sabbatical of Sabbatical years) is the redistribution of the nation’s and each family’s wealth, so that the nation returns to an economically-level playing field. So what is the focus of the Sabbatical month? The focus is that of putting work into its proper place! It is the enactment of legislation that demonstrates that one should not live to work, but instead work to live! As such, it is legislation to which American society should particularly give heed!

The primary purpose of the sabbatical month was to rest from work. For an entire month, the nation and, consequently, each of its families, ceased from that labor necessary to make money! It was to be a month, the rabbis suggested, for people to worship God, confess their sins, invest time in their children and enjoy their spouse, rather than to be absorbed in making a living. It was, in reality, a legislated annual retreat from work! That included an intentional divestment of a portion of one’s wealth, for the sacrifice of bulls, rams, lambs, goats and grain offerings were all the offering of some of one’s wealth gained by their employment. In one sense, it was the Hebrew way of taking a month’s vacation or holiday – time away from work to enjoy life and one’s family – time away that costs money (just as our going on a trip for our vacation costs money). In fact, the idea of people taking a month’s annual vacation has its origins in this legislation. But, in another sense, it is more than and other than a month’s vacation. For it is as if it were a month’s retreat – a time for each family to be still and learn that God is God – a taking of a vacation with God, to be spent in quiet, in reflection, in solitude as well as in enjoyment with each other.

So, to summarize, the sabbatical month is really a time for ceasing labor (and everyday life), to escape from the monotony of work and concentration upon making money in order to reflect, to worship God and to enjoy each other. It is also a time of sacrificing some of one’s wealth, both because one is not working on celebrative days and because one’s fair share of both burnt and grain offerings must be sacrificed. Thus, by observing the sabbatical month, one is divesting himself of a portion of his wealth, but even more important, one is divesting himself of one’s time, spending that time in Sabbath rest with one’s family and in the worship of God. By

doing so, one is creating a more balanced society that treasures the nurturance of relationships with each other, with family and with God, while intentionally breaking a fixation on work and the making of money!

**DEUTERONOMY 4:32—5:33; 6:4-25; 7:6-11; 10:12-20; 15:1-18; 16:1—17:20; 23:19-20**

**Deuteronomy 4:32-5:33.** The book of Deuteronomy is one of the most strategic books of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament). It is the clearest statement in the Bible of the world as God intended it to be. The word, “Deuteronomy” means “the second telling of the Law”; this book presents a summarization or “re-telling” of the Law, a systematic presentation of what is otherwise somewhat haphazardly stated throughout Exodus, Numbers and Leviticus. Deuteronomy is the closest Israel ever came to the development of a written “constitution” for its nation -- a book that lays out what one nation, under God, ought to look like.

The author of 2 Kings tells us that King Josiah repented when he heard Deuteronomy read to him (2 Kings 22:3-20) because he realized how far his kingdom had departed from God’s ideal. Thus, it was Deuteronomy that brought about the Josian reforms recorded in 2 Kings 22-23 that sought to rescue Judah from almost-certain annihilation by the world powers. It was Deuteronomy that formed the foundation for the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and the reformulation of the corporate life of Israel under Nehemiah. It was Deuteronomy that formed the template for the nation against which prophets like Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Amos and Ezekiel measured Israel. It was Deuteronomy that, along with the book of Isaiah, was most used by Jesus to call Israel to accountability. It was Deuteronomy that formed the base for John’s vision of “the New Jerusalem” and Paul’s vision for the kingdom of God.

As we study Deuteronomy, it is very important that we allow the Bible to speak for itself. Our natural tendency is to read a specific Scripture text in light of the present political, economic and religious environment rather than to allow the Scripture to critique that environment. Thus, for example, rather than living with the tension of the sabbatical year stipulation that all debts are to be forgiven every seven years (Deut. 15:1-2) and honestly asking, “How can we live present to this stipulation as Christians in today’s world?” we choose to ignore the injunction by saying, “That stipulation would never work in a capitalist economy”. In other words, we are using today’s economic environment as the means by which we determine which portions of Scripture we will take seriously and which we will summarily dismiss!

This is a very dangerous way to read Scripture. It is to misread Scripture (what is called in the formal study of the Scripture, “eisegesis” rather than “exegesis”). In essence our task, as we work with the Bible, is to allow Scripture to read us rather than us to read it!

The book of Deuteronomy can be divided into four parts. The first part (chapters 1-4) introduces the reader to the book, as the author recites God’s choice, deliverance, protection and guidance of Israel in the wilderness as they move toward the founding of their nation in the Promised Land.

The central section of the book makes up the second and third parts of the book. The second part lays out the primary covenant between God and Israel, and the principles that underlie that covenant (chs. 5-11). This includes the summary of the covenant around the Ten Commandments, and the way the religious (7:6-11, 10:12-20), political (7:17-26, cf. 16:18-17:20) and economic (6:10-25, cf. 15:1-18) systems are to operate to authentically follow that covenant.

The third part of Deuteronomy (chs. 12-28) is the “statutes and ordinances” which apply the covenant and its essential religious, political and economic design to the everyday functioning of Israel. Thus, Deuteronomy covers the laws that enable the religious system to enhance relationships with God (chs. 12-23), to create a truly just political system (16:18-20; 17:8-20; 19-21), laws that enable Israel’s economic system to act equitably toward all (14-15, 24 and 26), and laws which equally apply to all three systems (21-25). It also sets forth the central role of the prophet to hold each system accountable to God’s intentions for it (18).

The concluding portion of Deuteronomy (chapters 29-34) is a covenant renewal ceremony, in which Israel commits itself to the following of the Law, Moses selects and dedicates Joshua as his successor and then dies as Israel begins its invasion of Canaan.

What happens if we apply the principles of biblical exegesis presented above to the book of Deuteronomy, as outlined above? We will discover that Deuteronomy presents God’s design for the way the political, economic and religious systems of Israel are meant to operate. And that presentation begins with today’s lesson – Deuteronomy 4:32-5:33.

Deuteronomy 4 is basically an introduction to the book. It briefly rehearses the immediately-past history of Israel, which includes their deliverance from Egypt, their receiving of the Ten Commandments at Mt. Horeb, their being shaped into a nation in their 40-year sojourn in the wilderness, and now their readiness to occupy the Promised Land. An intriguing theological twist is placed upon these events – God calling them, God teaching them, God drawing them and preparing them for Canaan! It is God’s doing, not theirs! Then comes the primary objective of Deuteronomy 4:

“Because (Yahweh) loved your ancestors, he chose their descendants after them. He brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power, driving out before you nations greater and mightier than yourself, to bring you in, giving you their land for a possession as it is today. So acknowledge today and take to heart that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. Keep his statutes and his commandments, which I am commanding you today for your own well-being and that of your descendants after you, so that you may remain in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for all time” (4:37-40).

As they enter into the Promised Land, and as they continue to live in the Promised Land, this is what Israel is called to do – to “acknowledge and take to heart that the Lord is God” and to center both their life as a nation and their individual lives on that reality. As a nation, they are to build their corporate life around the embrace of God (God embracing the nation; they embracing God). And honestly and consistently doing that will mean a nation practicing justice and building a relational culture together.

Deuteronomy 5 lays out the primary covenant with Israel in presenting the Ten Commandments within that context. Moses begins the stating of that covenant by reminding us with whom it is made:

“The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. The Lord spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire” (5:2-4).

What is important to note, however, is that those who are standing there in solemn assembly listening to Moses’ words *were not* there at Horeb when Moses originally presented Israel with the Ten Commandments! They were, instead, the first generation *after* those original liberated slaves had been given the Decalogue 40 years earlier. And, in fact, Deuteronomy has taken pains in the previous chapters to make clear that those who are about to go into the Promised Land as fighting men (and their families) are a generation removed from slavery. The former slaves *all had to die in the desert* before Israel could occupy the land because those who had once been slaves had proven themselves too timid and fearful to invade. Their slavery had robbed them of their capacity to risk and thus obey God!

So what does Moses mean when he says, “Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today”? And how can he say that “the Lord spoke with you face to face at the mountain” – because God had not!

What is being expressed here is the timelessness of the Decalogue and, consequently, of God’s encounter with Israel. What he is, in essence, saying is that every generation faces its encounter with God at its Mount Horeb! Each generation is given the Ten Commandments afresh. And each generation decides whether or not it will construct its corporate life upon their obedience to it. Thus “all of us here alive today” were, in a very profound and true sense “with (God) face to face at the mountain” and there received these commands that would shape their entire society and its life together.

Chapter five then goes on to present a summary of the covenant that God has made with Israel. Their entire life together as a nation is to be built upon that covenant. That covenant is succinctly stated as the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 5:6-21). God’s part of this covenant was their effective and miraculous deliverance from Egyptian slavery and protection in the wilderness as God brought them to the Promised Land. Israel’s part in covenant agreement was to be obedient to it (including its summary in the Ten Commandments) and to follow it. This commentary on Deuteronomy 5:6-21 will not include an analysis of the Ten Commandments itself because that is thoroughly done in the commentaries on Exodus 20:1-20 (Cycle A Ordinary Time 27; A Epiphany 7), and we would refer you to those commentaries.

“You must therefore be carefully to do as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn to the right or to the left. You must follow exactly the path that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you are to possess” (5:32-33).

Thus, Deuteronomy 5 calls Israel to obedience to the covenant made between God and Israel, with the Ten Commandments that stated covenant. The remainder of Deuteronomy is the “statutes and ordinances” that apply that covenant to every facet of Israelite corporate and individual life. And God agrees that if they do so, God will bless them as a people and as individuals “so that you may live and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you are to possess”.

The Ten Commandments are presented in the book of Deuteronomy (5:6-21). But it is intriguing to compare and contrast it with the Exodus version. They are almost word-for-word identical except for one significant difference. In the command, “Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy”, two distinct reasons are given for observing that day.

Exodus states, “For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it” (Exodus 20:11).

Deuteronomy, on the other hand, says, “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and outstretched arm; therefore, the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day” (Deut. 5:15).

Why the difference? It is due to a difference in emphasis of the two accounts. Exodus declares creation as the reason for Sabbath rest. Deuteronomy declares that it is salvation history that is the reason for Sabbath rest – that, in all we do, we must remember God’s liberation of Israel – and of ourselves – from bondage!

**Deuteronomy 6:4-25** begins this book’s presentation on what the systems of Israel ought to be about, and how the faithful performance of these systems will lead to a nation that would practice justice, equity, the elimination of poverty and the sustaining of a relational culture, and thus be a model of God’s shalom. To understand this emphasis throughout Deuteronomy, however, we need to understand the nature of a “system”.

A system is a body of people organized politically, economically and with commonly-agreed upon values who are gathered together around three components: *values* which are held in common, *structures* that institutionalize those values, and *individuals* that manage and operate those institutions.

Each of the systems – the political system, the economic system, and the “religious” or value-sustaining system – is its own unique system. But it is also intertwined and integrated systems. If we are to perceive the depth of the social analysis that is occurring in the Scripture as it describes the world as God intended it to be and the world as it actually is, we need to first understand clearly what systems are and how they act. Only as we do so can we appreciate the depth of the analysis that occurs in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.

There is the *political system* -- that system by which society makes decisions about its common life. Politics is simply the agreed-upon means by which society orders its life through

the making of public and private decisions. The essential question of the political system is “How do we as a people determine to live together”?

The *economic system* is that agreed-upon means by which that society’s goods and services are generated and distributed. For all of its complexity, at its heart economics is profoundly simple -- for it simply has to do with the way society agrees to generate and apportion wealth. The essential question of the economic system is, “How do we as a people choose to create and distribute our wealth?”

The *religious system* is a little more complex -- not because the system is complex, but because of the predetermined meanings we bring to the word “religion.” The Latin root for the English word “religion” simply means “that which fences about”. In other words, what one believes sets the parameters around one’s life. Our “religion”, therefore is that system which inculcates in a society the essential beliefs, values and basic convictions on which that society constructs its life together. The essential question of the religious system is, “What do we, as a people, ultimately value?”

Earlier, we defined a system as a body of people organized politically, economically and with commonly-agreed upon values who are gathered together around those values, with structures that institutionalize those values and individuals that manage and operate those institutions. We have looked at the three systems themselves – the political, economic and “religious” systems by which any society functions. We are now about to look at those three components within and between systems (values, structure, and people) which enable systems to actually function. All three components must exist for a system to be a system.

*Values*, beliefs and convictions (i.e., that system’s or society’s “religion”) form the core of a system. Those values are both *articulated* and *unarticulated*. Articulated values are those values and beliefs to which the populace of a system gives clear recognition (“one man, one vote”). The unarticulated values are those beliefs and convictions that are rarely given voice but are operating assumptions by those who hold considerable power in the system (“power or money increases your influence”). Often the unarticulated values oppose the articulated values, and because they are unarticulated and are held by those most in power, they are usually more powerful than the articulated values -- even though those in power will give lip service to the articulated values. This was one of the chief criticisms Jesus had of the Pharisees (e.g., Mt 23:3). These religious leaders talked about the importance of obedience to the Law but were actually using the Law to bring both wealth and power to themselves.

*Structures* are the means by which the articulated values are institutionalized in that society, and are thus lived-out. Values, by themselves, will have no shaping impact upon a society unless structures are devised to implement and carry out those values in the life of that society. The structures are necessary for the values to be practiced effectively in that society. Thus, “no taxation without representation” was a core idea around which a revolutionary war was fought. But it was only an idea until it was concretized by the formation of the Constitution of the United States. It was the present constitution which developed a structure that adequately carried out the core values and principles of the United States, a federal government consisting of three bodies -- the legislative (a two-house Congress of a Senate and a House of

Representatives), the executive (the office of the President of the United States) and the judicial (the Supreme Court). This structure provided the concrete means by which each person in that nation could be represented in the decision-making process and thus could have a voice in the making of decisions resulting in their own taxation (remember the revolutionary cry, “No taxation without representation”)! Only that structure adequately lived out the values of a democracy that was seeking to preserve the values of government “of the people, by the people, for the people” (as Lincoln would later articulate it).

*Individuals* are those who people the structure and thus manage and operate those institutions. Without the people who make the structures work, the institutions are empty vessels, incapable of implementing the core values of a society. The making of a strong union in the United States which created the institutional strength to withstand the triple onslaught of slavery, the Civil War and the growth of giant corporations (though somewhat seduced by all three) was due to the happy raising to power at the same time in each of the three branches of government of several people of immense vision, power and determination -- Chief Justice John Marshall in the judiciary, John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson in the presidency and Daniel Webster in the legislature. Without these four men working to preserve the Union against the drive for states’ rights, secession and slavery, the present constitution would have been dissolved and the United States would have ceased to exist.

Thus, all three -- values, structures and individuals -- are necessary for the creation and sustenance of a system. When we talk about *systemic change*, therefore, what is meant by that is the recognition that significant change cannot occur in a society unless the *articulated* values of that society are truly embraced and that cannot occur unless the structures function to implement those values and the individuals who run those structures work for the interests of the people. *Only when individuals and structures and values change, do you have systemic change.*

It comes as a surprise to most contemporary Christians to realize that it was such an understanding of systems that underlay the Torah or Law of Moses. The Law existed to regulate the life of Israel, so that their political, economic and religious systems each had their unique function and yet worked together to maintain “one nation, under God”. Likewise, the Law spelled out quite clearly what the values were to be upon which that nation and its systems should be built, the ever-evolving structures to implement those values, and then the initial people (who would be followed by others not yet born) who would make those structures work for the good of the people. This sophisticated understanding of the nature of Israelite society moves throughout the warp-and-woof of the Torah. But it is nowhere as clearly articulated in the Hebrew or Christians Bibles as it is in chapters 6 through 11 and in 15 through 18 of Deuteronomy. In the Deuteronomical scriptures contained in this chapter, the regulations regarding the establishment and maintenance of the religious system will be found primarily in 7:6-11 and 10:12-20 (with an introduction in 6:4-10), the political system in 16:18-17:20 (and, in the lectionary itself, 18:15-20), and the economic system in 6:4-25 and 15:1-18. We will begin that exploration of the Israelite systems “as God intended them to be” with this examination of Deuteronomy 6.

Jesus commended the lawyer, when he asked him to summarize the Law. The man’s summarization was this: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all



your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). Jesus replied, “You have given the right answer; do this and you will live” (10:28).

The first segment of the young man’s summary of the Law -- the love of God -- was taken from the beginning of the Deuteronomic exploration of the nature of Israel’s systems. It is quoted from Deuteronomy 6:5. The second segment of this summary of the Law -- the love of neighbor -- was from Leviticus 19:18. But although that second commandment is stated in the most pithy way in that verse from Leviticus, the perspective that one must love the neighbor as well as God runs throughout the entirety of the book of Deuteronomy (as we will later demonstrate).

The basic reality of Israelite life, according to Deuteronomy, is that of being centered in a national relationship with God. That relationship is meant to be both individual and corporate, infusing all family, community, city and national life, and permeating all three systems. The beginning of Deuteronomy 6 – verses 1-9 – presents that foundational reality of God’s intentions for Israel. But the nature and extent of this relationship is stated most thoroughly in Deuteronomy 7 (the next scripture we will explore after we have completed working with chapter 6).

The main emphasis of Deuteronomy 6 is on an examination of the economic system which Israel is to sustain (vv. 10-25). A nation and culture built on relationship with God and for all in the realm must inevitably mean dealing with how the wealth of that nation is generated and distributed. So Deuteronomy 6 presents the economic profile of a nation truly under God. It begins its analysis with this insight:

“When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you -- a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant -- and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Deut. 6:10-12).

A similar insight is further developed in Deuteronomy 8. “When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then . . . do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today” (Dt. 8:12-13, 17-18).

Deuteronomy reminds the Israelites that Palestine existed, with all of its wealth and power, before they were born and before they entered the land. He reminds them that it was God who took them out of Egypt “with a strong hand and a mighty arm”, that it was God who rescued them from slavery, that it was God who protected them in the desert for forty years and molded them there into a mighty nation, and that it was God who brought them into the Promised Land and gave to them all of its wealth. You live, Israel, in “fine, large cities *that you did not build*,

houses . . . *that you did not fill*, hewn cisterns *that you did not hew*, vineyards and olive groves *that you did not plant*” (6:10b-11).

In other words, what Deuteronomy is reminding Israel is that all that they have is a gift from God! Therefore, do not insult God by saying, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” No, Israel, you have not “pulled yourself up by your own bootstraps”! The wealth the nation possesses is a free gift from God, a wealth that God has chosen to invest in them. And why? God has chosen them simply because he loves them. And why does he love them? It is not because there is something about them that is so good or fine that they are commended to God. God has chosen to love them because they were beaten down and enslaved and powerless. (Dt. 7:1-13) And that is because God is always on the side of the powerless or marginalized.

What, then, does God expect out of them? What God expects from Israel is that they will use this wealth they have been given for the benefit of all the people (Dt., chs. 6-8). This wealth does not belong to them. It is a gift from God. Therefore, they are to perceive it, *not as a private wealth to be owned but as a common wealth that God has invested in them so that they can be good trustees or stewards of it*. God is the abundant God who gives out of his abundance. The nation must therefore keep before themselves the recognition that all that they have is gift, and since it belongs to God and is only temporarily invested in his people, they are to use it for the common good by being wise trustees of it.

Deuteronomy 6 then ends on a rather intriguing note. “When your children ask you in time to come, “What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord your God has commanded you?” then you shall say to your children, “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. He brought us out from them in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. Then the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case. If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right”” (6:20-25).

It is intriguing that the way Israel reports to its children and grand-children its commitment to keep the Law is to recite its salvation or liberation history. “We were Pharaoh’s slaves”. They tell the story of God’s rescue of them from Egyptian bondage, and then say, “Our response is to maintain the covenant and the laws between Israel and God”. So they did!

**Deuteronomy 7:1-11** continues the exploration of the function of Israel’s religious system. As first established in Deuteronomy 6:1-9, Israel’s religious system is to concentrate upon strengthening the relationships between God and the people and between one another. The task of the religious system is to build Israel into a relational culture.

**Deuteronomy 7:1-5:** Deuteronomy 7 examines the relational nature of Israel and its religious system by exploring two sides of a relational culture. The first side is the dark side, and that is presented in Deuteronomy 7:1-5.

“When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you – the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you – and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But this is how you must deal with them: break down their altars, smash their pillars, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire” (7:1-5).

This is the horrifying side of what is otherwise both an extremely-insightful and beautifully-written book, presenting a profound design for the structure of a nation that is living under Yahweh. How could such darkness appear side-by-side with such beauty and wisdom?

To understand such a horrifying command, one must understand the culture of Palestine into which the Israelite nation was entering. Twelve hundred years before the birth of Jesus, the land of Canaan was essentially a “no-man’s” land, a land that was occupied by many small city states, practicing trade and agriculture, and interspersed with rural sheep-farming communities. Rather than being made up of one national group, it was made up of many tribes (“the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites”), sometimes living peacefully next to each other but most often in conflict with each other for favored watering holes, pastures and commerce. The only thing these tribes and communities had in common was their commitment to holding their respective land and their worship of their respective national gods (Dagon, Moloch, Ashtoreth, Ba’al). Each of these gods, unlike Yahweh, was a god designed to maintain the status quo of a society that was dominated by a king or leader whom the people served as serfs. And therein lay the problem.

The Israelites believed that they were selected by Yahweh to be God’s chosen people, a people who would live in relationship with God and each other, and would therefore practice a politics of justice and an economics of equitable distribution of wealth both so they would continue in an authentic relationship of equality with each other (“no king ruling over them, because Yahweh was their king”) and would be building a nation with the earmarks of a national relationship with their God (justice, economic equality, elimination of poverty). The premise of Deuteronomy is that if Israel is a nation in love with Yahweh, then it will inevitably be a nation that loves its people. So it is that Deuteronomy’s intention to build its society on a love relationship with God and each other must inevitably move that society to shape its political system in conformity to those love relationships.

Because of this premise, the book of Deuteronomy extends Israel’s protection and inclusion to “strangers” and “aliens within your gates” (10:19). But such protection and equality is not to be extended to “foreigners” or “other nations” (15:3-6). The differentiation

Deuteronomy was making was important. The “stranger” or “alien” was a person of another ethnic or racial group or of another nation who had surrendered belief in their god and embraced Yahweh (e.g., Ruth, the great-grandmother of King David, who was a citizen of the nation and tribe of Moab, but who had immigrated to Israel and embraced its relational culture and God – see Ruth 1:16-17).

The “foreigner” or people of “other nations”, on the other hand, were those inside the land of Canaan who embraced the gods of unilateral aristocratic or military power (Molech, Baal) or rapaciousness or concupiscence (Dagon, Ashtoreth). Thus, Israel was enjoined by Deuteronomy to have nothing to do with nations or peoples who ran their societies through a conspiracy of king, economic elite, priest and the military for the purpose of dominating the people and using them as serfs. This injunction is not because of racial, ethnic or national discrimination; rather it was because Israel stood for a national justice and relational culture that is opposed to what the other nations stand for. Deuteronomy 7:1-5 is dealing with the peoples in the Promised Land who were “foreigners” or “other nations”, not “strangers” or “aliens within your gates”.

The reason this seemingly evil and arbitrary action was commanded by Deuteronomy was because the biggest danger facing Israel on entering the Promised Land was that they would be seduced by the “gods”, life-style and values of the resident people. Even if “the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites” were conquered by Israel but the Israelite tribes then moved in among them, it would only be a matter of time before the people of Israel would be lured away from their worship of Yahweh and their practice of a just political and economic order. Because of the attractiveness of pagan worship and practice (less demanding gods easily appeased, the security of a centralized government, sexual liberties [cult prostitution and sexual promiscuity was an integral part of worshipping these gods] and the opportunity to become immensely wealthy at the expense of your contemporaries), it would be inevitable that the Israelites would be seduced away from their stern desert deity and his requirement for political and economic morality. Thus, the Deuteronomic requirement presented in 7:1-5 was necessary for survival. Intriguingly, it was not followed by Israel who did not fully conquer the land but sought to live alongside the pagan peoples there, and thus was indeed seduced away from the practice of Yahweh justice as they increasingly conformed to pagan societal standards (that’s what the book of Judges is all about).

Thus, Deuteronomy 7:1-5 instructs the Israelites that, on invading the land of Canaan, they were not only to defeat its current occupants, but were to “destroy” these “foreigners” and “other nations”. They were not to intermarry with them. They were to make no political or economic agreements with them. And the shrines and sanctuaries of their gods were to be torn down and destroyed.

But this was commanded of “foreigners” and “other nations”, not for “strangers” and “aliens within your gates”. Because the stranger and alien had embraced the God of Israel and the political and economic culture this God represented, they were to be treated like Israelites. They might be of “foreign” extraction and not of Israelite “blood”. But their ethnicity meant nothing. Their embrace of Yahweh meant everything! They had become believers in Yahweh and the kingdom Yahweh was seeking to build through his people. And therefore, they were of

the Israelite people, covered by the same laws that protected every Israelite. That is why, in the book of Deuteronomy, the constant refrain is to protect the rights and give every economic and political advantage to “the aliens within your gates” (i.e., under your protection), as well as to “orphans and widows”) (1:16, 5:14, 10:18-19, 14:21, 14>29, 16:11, 16:14, 23:7, 24:14, 24:17, 26:12-13, 27:19, 28:32, 29:11, 31:12).

The issue is put squarely in Deut. 13:5. “But these (foreigners) shall be put to death for having spoken treason against the Lord your God – who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery – to turn you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.” The act of following the political and economic ethics and morals of another god than Yahweh was treason. And because such acts of treason, multiplied throughout the Israelite community, would lead to the death of the Yahweh ethic, Israel was commanded to “purge the evil from your midst”.

So it is that Deuteronomy 7:1-5 presents the dark side of a relational culture. It is a culture built around a society placing relationships at the core of its values, rather than building that society upon a lust for power, prestige or possessions. It is positing a culture that is warm and embracing and inclusive in its very life style. But to be so, it must also exclude from its midst those who would live by those standards and loyalties that would threaten that relational culture, those who by their very existence will seduce people away from that culture to an alternate lifestyle that, by its very existence, would seek the destruction of that relational culture. This is the dilemma of the very best, as well as the very worst, of all cultures!

***Deuteronomy 7:6-11:*** There is another section in Deuteronomy 7 which is as bright as 7:1-5 is dark. For contained within this chapter is the most magnificent and moving statement of grace contained anywhere in the Old Testament. It is introduced by the statement, “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession” (7:6).

It is after this rather formulative statement that these amazing words on grace then occur:

“It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you – for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, and who repays in their own person those who reject him. He does not delay but repays in their own person those who reject him. Therefore, observe diligently the commandments, the statutes and ordinances, that I am commanding you today” (7:7-11).

You Israelites are chosen by God to be God’s people, Deuteronomy proclaims. But why are you the ones to be chosen? It is simply because God loves you. And why does God love you? Because God arbitrarily chooses to love you. It is not because there is something about you that is particularly lovable! It is not because there is something about you that particularly commends you to God. It is not because you are a great, powerful and influential nation – in

fact, it is the very opposite, because you are at the bottom rung of all the nations. It is simply because God has chosen to love you. He has arbitrarily chosen you. He simply chooses to love you – because it is in the nature of God to love! That is why you are loved and chosen by God.

This is a statement of sheer, unadulterated grace, as Israel receives the message that they are already loved and accepted by God as God’s people – not because they are so superior but because God loves and accepts as arbitrarily as this. The issue with Israel, according to Deuteronomy, is not whether they are accepted. The issue is whether they can accept that they are already accepted! For they are accepted. They are loved. And why? Because that is the way that God is!!!

Thus, it is that the most remarkable statement of God’s grace and the darkest statement of the destruction of a people competing with Israel for the same land occur in the same chapter – the seventh chapter of Deuteronomy. Rejection and acceptance. Love and hate. Darkness and light! Such is the nature of a relational culture.

**Deuteronomy 10:12-20** explores further the Deuteronomic requirements regarding the religious system of Israel. The basic reality of Israelite life, according to Deuteronomy, is that of being centered in a national relationship with God.

“So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. . . . For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great god, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear” (Deut 10:12-13, 17-20).

This passage captures in the most beautiful and compelling language the primary emphasis throughout the entirety of Deuteronomy. Israel is to be centered in Yahweh. The God of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebecca, of Moses and Zipporah are to become their God too. And that is to happen at both a national level and at a personal level.

Israel is to be in a national love relationship with God. “Hear, *O Israel*, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart” (Deut 6:4-5a, emphasis mine). This is not a command simply to individuals. This is a command to a *nation*! But how can a *nation* love God?

What is being set down as the foundation for Israel’s national life is what today would be called by sociologists a *relational culture*. A relational culture is one in which power is shared through the people’s participation both in the formation and the ongoing functioning of their society’s political, economic and religious (“values-formation”) systems. Relational or people power seeks to distribute power, with public life built around the relationships people have with

one another – including those chosen to be in authority. Such a culture was very evident in the early years of Israel’s history when the social structure was very “flat”, with any Israelite having direct access to and the capacity for exercising influence over each leader. Such a relational culture was clearly assumed by the author of Deuteronomy as a precondition for the successful exercise of power.

The foundation of Israelite culture was both social and personal relationship with God. A relationship with God had both a public dimension and a personal (or private) dimension. Nothing is as important as both our individual and societal relationship with God and with each other. Deuteronomy is quite clear about this; the author is not interested in the nation or its people simply holding right beliefs about God, embracing right doctrines or celebrating right liturgies. What Deuteronomy wants is an active, dynamic relationship with God on the part of the nation, of all its people and of each person. In the final analysis, Israel’s capacity to be the kind of society God desires and calls it to be depends upon their capacity to respond to God’s love with like love.

“It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you -- for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (Deut 7:7-8).

In this remarkable passage, the author tells us that Israel was selected by God to be God’s chosen people -- not because of any superior quality in them, but because they were “the fewest of all peoples”. That phrase does not mean “the lowest population of all peoples” but “the least powerful of all peoples”. At the time of the Exodus, Israel was the weakest and most oppressed people in the world -- and therefore God chose them. God is always on the side of the powerless, marginalized and the poor.

The premise of Deuteronomy is that if the nation and its people are in love with God, then it will inevitably be a nation that loves its people. And why? Simply because God is in love with the people! “God loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (10:18b-19). Being a culture which places its primary value on relationship to God must mean a culture which places primary value on people and their well-being. So it is that Deuteronomy’s intention to build its society on a love relationship with God and each other must inevitably move that society to shape its political system in conformity to those love relationships.

**Deuteronomy 15:1-18** is the second of the pivotal passages in the book of Deuteronomy dealing with the economic system of a nation and of a people, as God intends it to be. In the first passage, Deuteronomy 6:6-25, the author presents an economics of stewardship. The Deuteronomist states that the wealth the nation possesses is a free gift from God, a wealth that God has chosen to invest in them for the good of all the people, Israelites and aliens alike. Their wealth is not a private wealth to be owned but is a common wealth that God has invested in them so that they can be good trustees or stewards of it. If one holds to these assumptions about

wealth, therefore, the question that must be inevitably asked is, “Toward what end is Israel to manage its wealth?” Why did Israelites prophets, for example, feel that it was important to continually remind both the powerful and the people that they were to be good stewards of the wealth God had shared in common between them? That is the question addressed in Deuteronomy 15:1-18.

“There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today. . . . Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land” (Deut. 15:4-5, 11).

There is only one reason why wealth is given to a nation, Deuteronomy states. God makes a nation wealthy for the purpose of eliminating its poverty. ***The elimination of poverty is to be the primary agenda both of the systems and of each individual Israelite!***

In the Hebrew language, three distinct types of poverty are recognized. This is stated succinctly in Amos 2:6-7: “For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the . . . needy (*ebyon*) for a pair of sandals – they who trample the head of the poor (*dallim*) into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted (*anawim*) out of the way”.

In this passage, three different types of poverty are identified by the prophet. The *ebyon* are people totally dependent on others, those who are utterly destitute and must beg in order to survive. Those who are *dallim* are the physically weak and materially poor – they simply have neither the capital nor the strength to make it financially in life. Finally, there are the *anawin* – those who know themselves to be of no account, the people broken under their weight of poverty so that they are entirely dependent on others for their survival. Today we would call the *ebyon* the “extremely impoverished” who have no hope (there are few “extremely impoverished” in the USA, but there are 1,000,000,000 in the world), the *dallim* the deserving poor (they are trying their best but have too much against them) and the *anawin* the generational poor (where poverty has been passed down from generation to generation until it becomes a virtual life-style of “beating the system”).

But what is significant in this passage is not the analysis it contains about the Israelites’ understanding of the nature of poverty. What is significant is that God condemns Israel for allowing some of its people to be exploited, impoverished or oppressed. The point this scripture makes is that it is irrelevant whether one’s poverty is the result of a reversal in the nation’s economy, unfortunate and unavoidable personal calamity, bad choices made by the person, laziness, or even generational poverty. The point is that – however the person or family got into these circumstances – they are now poor and vulnerable. And it is the responsibility of each Israelite and the political and economic systems of Israel to resolve the situation both by requiring legislation that will enable these poor to help themselves out of their dilemma and by expecting acts of compassion on the part of the people that will help set these people free from these shackles of impoverishment!



This is perhaps no more graphically stated in scripture than in Deuteronomy 15. This chapter states three things about poverty. First, poverty is wrong and should be eliminated from God's nation (Deut. 15:4). Second, the fact is that no matter how hard you work to eliminate poverty, "there will never cease to be some in need on the earth" (15:11).<sup>7</sup> Finally, "I command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land'" (15:11).

In this formative passage, the Deuteronomist tells us the nation – and not simply individuals or groupings of individuals (e.g., charities or NGOs) are to act corporately to address the poverty of its people (15:4). Beginning with the next paragraph, we will examine specific laws Deuteronomy sets to guarantee that the state of Israel would act to eliminate poverty. Secondly, this text reminds us that – no matter what legislation is being implemented – poverty will keep on appearing and is inevitable (15:11a). But third, just because poverty is irrepressible, that is no excuse to not work hard to deal with it. And that working hard includes both national action and individual action; all of us are to "open our hand to the poor and needy neighbor in our land" (15:11b).

How was the nation of Israel to function in order to win a "War on Poverty"? Deuteronomy is replete with instructions as to how the nation can guarantee that the economy is managed in such a way that poverty will be eliminated. One such way is to observe *the sabbatical year*. "Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts. And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor, not exacting it of a neighbor who is a member of the community, because the Lord's remission has been proclaimed" (Deut. 15:1-2).

Every seven years, all debts of all Israelites were to be forgiven (Deut. 15:1-11). Those who through personal misfortune, national reversals, laziness or even poor management had sunk into poverty over that seven-year period would have all their debts forgiven. That, in essence, brought about a transfer of wealth so that people formerly in debt could start all over again.

The sabbatical year also contained provisions regarding slavery (Deut. 15:12-18). Deuteronomy commands that no slave could be held beyond six years except by his or her consent. On the sabbatical year, each slave was to be set free. Intriguingly, Deuteronomy is quite specific in stating that these regulations applied to female as well as male slaves.

The final regulation of the sabbatical year does not appear in Deuteronomy but in Exodus, and later became associated with the sabbatical year. The land was to lie fallow for one year so that it could renew itself (Exodus 23:10-11). With no fertilizers except animal dung to renew the earth, it had to "rest" in order to be able to continue to provide sufficient crops for the Israelites.

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<sup>7</sup> Jesus used this verse from Deuteronomy when he said, "You always have the poor with you" (Mt. 26:11; compare Deut. 15:11). Those who wish to justify an increasing division of the impoverished and the wealthy or those who simply want to avoid their responsibility often use this statement. But to do so is to significantly misuse Scripture. Jesus quoted Deuteronomy within the context of the reality that he would not always be with Israel. It is illegitimate eisegesis to use Jesus' quotation of Deuteronomy 15:11 as a means to justify poverty and a nation or church doing nothing to eliminate it.

A significant refinement of the sabbatical year was the Jubilee – legislation that is presented in Leviticus 25. The Jubilee was the Sabbath of the sabbatical year. That is, it occurred on the 49<sup>th</sup> year (or the seventh sabbatical year). The observance of the Jubilee included the three sabbatical requirements: the land lay fallow, all debts were forgiven and all slaves were freed (Lev. 25:11, 25-55). But Jubilee added a fourth stipulation that was the most remarkable social and economic legislation in the Bible.

Wealth in ancient Israel was held in the land one owned. Every Israelite tribe, clan and family had been assigned a designated portion of land when Israel conquered Palestine under Joshua. That land was each family's "birthright"; it was to be the foundation upon which that family's financial existence would be built. But as the years went by, poor families would sell their birthright in order to eliminate their debt.

Jubilee was designed to put an end to this practice. It decreed that if a poor family had to sell its birthright, the new owner was required to return that family's birthright to them *at no charge* on the Jubilee (Lev. 25:23-34). Thus, by this legislation, Israel had built into its society a means to periodically redistribute wealth. It was a radical reversal of fortune designed to keep wealth from steadily increasing in the hands of the wealthy few at the expense of the poor. No matter how much land the powerful could accumulate, they had to surrender all of it every 50 years and return it at no cost to its original owners!

Besides the sabbatical year and Jubilee, the Israelites had other laws designed to eliminate poverty through the redistribution of income. One such regulation was that all loans were to be made without charging interest (Deut. 23:19-20). Another regulation was three tithes (a tithe is 10% of income) of a family's annual income in which one tithe was to go the king and judiciary, a second tithe to the Levites and religious leaders and a third tithe to the poor (Deut. 14:22-29; 16:1-17). The tithe to the poor was to be given at the Festival of First Fruits (Deut. 26:1-15), and was to be distributed directly to the poor themselves.

There are many other instructions within Deuteronomy regarding the responsibility of the rich and middle class toward the poor of the land. But these are some of the most surprising and intriguing requirements. We see demonstrated, in even this brief synopsis of Deuteronomy's economic policies, Israel's commitment to *compensatory economic justice*. All the instructions are designed to bring to reality the assertion that "there will . . . be no poor among you!"

It is intriguing to note that the commitment to the sabbatical and to compensatory economic justice was not only a part of Israelite culture. It was also central to the life and mission of the early Christian church (Acts 4:32-35).

It has long been recognized that the early Christians were an intentional communitarian community. What is not equally recognized was that such a practice was not simply due to the level of commitment and trust they had in each other or even obedience to the teachings of Jesus (e.g., the "Sermon on the Mount"). They were a communitarian culture because that was the acting out of Jewish religious, political and economic beliefs and actions about how the *shalom community* should live.

The premise of the earliest Christian church was that it was the “New Israel” – Israel as God had originally intended it to be. They had a new Moses (Jesus), a new law (the law of love as exemplified in the Sermon on the Mount), twelve founders of the nation (the twelve disciples rather than the twelve tribes). And as the new Israel, the Church was to carry out the Deuteronomic economic reforms that were designed to eliminate poverty. The Christians had become the practitioners of the sabbatical year!

But those Christians added a new twist to that year. Instead of practicing it every seven years, they practiced it continuously! They created an economic *system* based upon the *value* of wealth as being a common wealth rather than private wealth (“everything they owned was held in common” – vs. 32) in order to eliminate poverty (“there was not a needy person among them” vs. 34). They devised the *structure* of a continuing assembly or gathering of people (they all lived together). And they determined the *people* to provide the rule and leadership of the system (the apostles and, later, the deacons). Thus, they created a continuous community rather than a society that had to be “righted again” every seven years.

The above regulations of Deuteronomy 15 were all constructed in order to guarantee that the poor were equitably treated and, if possible, poverty eventually eliminated. It was all designed to end the financial disparity between “rich” and “poor” and to systematically and regularly (every seven and forty-nine years) create an economic “level playing field”. These laws sought to regulate the economic and political life of Israel through its religion. The Sabbatical laws of Deuteronomy 15 were designed, for example, to minimize the wealth-accumulating capacity of some Israelites at the expense of the less fortunate and weak. By requiring all creditors to forgive the indebtedness of all Israelites every seven years, this law would prevent any group from amassing unreasonable wealth and power.

It is noteworthy that such regulatory legislation existed specifically and avowedly on behalf of the poor. The motivation behind the seven year and Jubilee debt forgiveness was that “there should be no poor among you” (Deut. 15:4). If Israel was faithful to protect the rights of the poor and provide means by which they could be liberated from their poverty, then, the author of Deuteronomy promised, “in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you” (vs. 4).

But this is not all that Israel was called to do regarding the poor.

“If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake” (vv. 7-8, 10).

Having systems of justice and making sure those systems operate on behalf of the poor was not enough. God wanted the Israelites to *care sincerely* about the poor. Old Testament concern for the oppressed, exploited and marginalized was not merely a matter of cold obligation and legislative duty. It was to be acted out of a heart of genuine compassion and sensitivity. It

was not enough to create just systems; the nation had to long for justice and love those who were victims of injustice – *putting their money where their mouths were!* This was what made the response of the earliest Christian church so profound, because it was not simply that they decided to practice Jubilee continuously (rather than once every 49 years); they did so out of a deep love and concern for the poorest in their midst! Thus, that earliest church realized what Deuteronomy had intended hundreds of years earlier – a people who acted out of genuine compassion for the poor as well as out of legislative necessity.

**Deuteronomy 16:18-17:20.** This scripture is the definitive statement in Deuteronomy about the political system. Although it is referred to throughout chapters 5 through 11, it is in 16:18-17:20 that the political system is carefully examined as to what role God intended it to play in the nation of Israel.

Deuteronomy names two systems for ordering the political life of the nation -- the judicial system and the system of governance (i.e., the king). There was, in Israel, no third branch of government – the legislative – because the roles of both creating new legislation and implementing that legislation lay in the office of the king.

What Deuteronomy presents regarding the judicial system is frankly remarkable for its time. The role of the judge in Israelite life is laid out as follows:

“You shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes, in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall render just decisions for the people. You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (Deut 16:18-20).

“Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue.” The responsibility of the judicial system is to mete out justice according to the Law. Judges are not to be influenced by the rank or position of the person before them for judgment; they are not to accept bribes because that will subvert justice. The only purpose of the judicial system is to seek justice.

To guarantee that justice will indeed occur, Deuteronomy creates an appellate court system. If a judge feels he cannot adjudicate a case after hearing it, or if a person feels he has received biased treatment from the judge, he or she has the right to appeal that case to a higher court (Deut 17:8-13). And the judgment of that higher court, adjudicated not by secular judges but by the Levitical priests (who are presumably more sensitive to the leading and prompting of God) is to be final. “As for anyone who presumes to disobey the priest appointed to minister there to the Lord your God or the judge, that person shall die” (17:12).

It is intriguing, incidentally, that the supreme adjudication of a case is not done by the king (as it was in all other Middle Eastern countries at the time) but by the Levitical priesthood. In this way, the creation and enforcement of laws was separated from the adjudication of laws, thus making collusion between the two branches of government far more difficult.

Deuteronomy is the book that first presents the office of the king to Israel (the second of the two political systems of the nation). In essence, what Deuteronomy does is significantly proscribe the rights and privileges of the king of Israel so that he is reduced to a vice-regent under the true king -- Yahweh.

“When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, “I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me,” you may indeed set over you a king whom the Lord your God will choose. One of your own community you may set as king over you; you are not permitted to put a foreigner over you, who is not of your own community. Even so, he must not acquire many horses for himself, or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since the Lord has said to you, “You must never return that way again.” And he must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself. When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the Levitical priests. It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel” (Deut 17:14-20).

The Deuteronomic regulations regarding Israel’s king are not truly meaningful outside of an understanding of the nature of monarchy in a Near Eastern society of that time. In all nations other than Israel, the king was an absolute monarch, the sole voice of authority in the land. There was no other authority but his, since he was a total despot. The judiciary was an instrument of the king, accountable to him in their adjudication of his laws. The bureaucracy existed to implement the decisions of the king. He was allowed such power by nobles and common people alike because he was seen as the incarnation (in Egypt) or manifestation (in Assyria and Babylonia) of that nation’s chief god; he was their god “enfleshed”. The king not only controlled the political and religious life of the nation, but also its economic system. He was the richest person in the realm, operating under the assumption that all the wealth of the land belonged to him and not to the people. In essence, all the land of the nation – its cities, its farm land, its forests, its rivers belonged to the king, and all the people – whether noblemen or peasants, were his serfs! At the most, that wealth might be assigned to a person to be a steward of the king’s wealth -- but it was still the king’s wealth. Therefore, the king was, in his single person, the religious, political and economic systems personified.

Israelite kingship, as defined by Deuteronomy, was profoundly different. The king was to be a commoner -- an ordinary person whom God would select to be monarch. His reign would not be hereditary -- it could not be passed on to his heirs. Rather, each new monarch would be chosen from the people. The reward of the Israelite king for wisely ruling his nation was not to accumulate wealth for himself nor his family or tribe. He was to live frugally and not ostentatiously. He was not to have a harem or many wives. He was not to enslave his subjects or sell them into slavery to another king (the meaning of “he must not return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses”). Finally, he was to keep a copy of the book of the Law before him and to have a portion of it read each day to him in order to remind himself of his obligations

(not his privileges) as a king. Hebrew kingship, as described in Deuteronomy, was unlike any monarchy existing anywhere else in the East.

What is placed clearly by Deuteronomy before the political system is that this system exists to dispense justice. For the judiciary, it is clearly ordered and it is separated from the authority of the king in order that its adjudication would not be compromised. For the monarch, justice is the inevitable result of rulership that exists to serve the people and not to perceive the nation as one's personal property for him to use to further his own ends or wealth.

A nation and culture built on relationship with God and each other will inevitably result in a government that will seek justice in all it does. But a commitment to justice for both rich and poor alike will inevitably mean dealing with the way the wealth of that nation is generated and distributed. That is why, in the Jewish Law, there is such a strong emphasis on the relationship between politics and economics, so that there is not a separation and even a dichotomy between them, but rather a carefully-designed partnership for guaranteeing that there would be no poverty in the land.

**Deuteronomy 23:19-20** is the Jewish Law's regulation regarding the making and repayment of loans. Deuteronomy is replete with instructions as to how the nation can guarantee that the economy is managed in such a way that poverty will be eliminated from the nation. One way to redistribute income was through loans. Because of the sabbatical year, it is reasonable to assume that the wealthy would be hesitant to provide loans to those struggling in the economy. Deuteronomy instructs them not to be hesitant.

The Law commands that loans are to be given between the sabbatical years. They are to be made, not so that the loaner can make money, but rather that the borrower can be financially assisted and his needs met. The primary stipulation on such loans is that they are to be given without interest (23:19-20). The purpose of making a loan was not to make money, but to help out your neighbor in need. So to charge interest on a loan would be to take advantage of the vulnerability of your neighbor, who would not have requested a loan if he were not already in trouble. How dare you make money on the misfortune of another person! Again, such loans were not only to be interest-free; they were automatically to be forgiven on the sabbatical year, no matter how little principle had been paid nor how late in the sabbatical cycle it was granted (15:7-11). There was to be no making of money on the misfortune of other Jews!

## **II SAMUEL 12:5-12**

**II Samuel 12:5-12.** Perhaps the classic case of demanding accountability from the powerful is the story of King David and Bathsheba. It is perhaps one of the best-known stories in scripture. While his army is at war, David has remained behind in Jerusalem. There, from the roof of his palace, he sees a woman bathing, and "the woman was very beautiful" (2 Sam 11:2b). Her name is Bathsheba, and she is the wife of Uriah, a leader in David's army. David brings Bathsheba to his home, and has sex with her. She becomes pregnant. To cover up his wrongdoing, David brings Uriah home on the pretext of reporting to the king the progress of the war. David's

assumption is that Uriah will sleep with his wife, and therefore David's immoral act will be covered-up. However, Uriah refuses to go to his home, saying "My lord Joab (the commanding general of Israel) and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? I will not do such a thing" (11:11)! Frustrated, David compounds his crime by adding murder to it. He sends Uriah back to the front and commands Joab to place him in the most vulnerable part of the battlefield where he is killed. David then marries Bathsheba. The king seems to have been successful in covering up his multiple crimes.

But David has reckoned without Nathan the prophet. Nathan comes to David and tells him a story. "(Nathan) said to him, 'There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.'" Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and because he had no pity." Nathan said to David, "You are the man!"' (12:1-7)

What then followed was a demand for accountability unparalleled in the Bible. Nathan is almost brutal in his confrontation of the king. He exposes the entirety of both David's lust and the deception and immorality of his treatment of Uriah. The prophet then lays out the inevitable consequences of David's compounded sin. "Thus says the Lord: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house, and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun" (12:11-12).

David repents, and God forgives him. But even God cannot wipe out the consequences of David's sin. David's child born to the seduced Bathsheba dies, and the scourge of family unfaithfulness, sexual lust and lust for power that was launched by David's sin tears David's household to pieces.

This is a classic example of both biblical leaders and ordinary people holding the powerful accountable – whether their power is political, economic or religious, whether they are heathen or believer, whether they are a leader of government, a spiritual leader, a disciple (Mk 8:31-33) or even an elderly couple obsessed with their money (Acts 5:1-11).

Yet how the church avoids holding its people accountable today. We perceive ourselves as a volunteer society (which we are not – God calls us into the church; we don't choose it). So I have often heard pastors say, "Why, I can't demand accountability of my church members for the sloppy job they do or for reneging on a commitment." Oh, yes you can! They may be angry at the time, but they will respect you for it.

## II KINGS 18:13—19:37

**II Kings 18:13—19:37.** Isaiah the prophet came out of his self-imposed exile after the death of King Ahaz, who had chosen to accept subordination to and becoming a vassal state of the Assyrian Empire rather than to trust in God for Judah's deliverance. In making this choice, King Ahaz had rejected the prophetic advice of Isaiah to trust in Yahweh for the deliverance of the nation. Instead, he had chosen to trust in the power of Assyria and thus compromise with them.

Upon King Ahaz' death, however, Isaiah came out of exile to speak to Israel's new king. Hezekiah was now on Judah's throne, and Isaiah soon caught his ear. Hezekiah, inspired by the desire to be "God's man", began a reformation in Judah's life which returned the country to obedience to their covenants with Yahweh, eliminated syncretism (worship of Assyria's gods and of the Canaanite gods as well as of Yahweh), and guaranteed social justice for all.

Hezekiah began his reformation by ridding the Temple of the Assyrian gods. He stopped all prayers for the Assyrian emperor and all worship of their gods. Under Isaiah's direction, Hezekiah reinstated pure Yahweh worship. For the first time in nearly a decade, the Passover Feast was once again celebrated throughout Judah, and the people were reminded of how Yahweh had delivered them from the bondage of another tyrant. Hezekiah also sought social reform by standardizing weights and measures, thus causing a more fair and equitable distribution of wealth.

Finally, when Sargon II died in 705 BCE, Hezekiah refused to pay tribute to Assyria. In the chaos which always followed the death of an Assyrian emperor, Hezekiah rebelled against his conquerors. His army moved north into Assyrian territory, taking land which once belonged to his forefather, David.

Sennacherib, the new Assyrian emperor, soon came roaring down upon little Judah. He defeated Hezekiah in battle and sent the remains of Judah's army rushing to Jerusalem. What happened next is unclear. Assyrian records suggest that Sennacherib stopped the war because of rebellion that occurred in Assyria and returned to Ninevah to put down that unrest. Then, once he had secured Assyria, he returned to Judah to continue its conquest and elimination.

At any rate, Sennacherib eventually sought to complete the war against Hezekiah. He took Judah's main fortress, Lachish, and pushed on to Jerusalem. There one of the most significant events in Judah's history took place – an event so significant that it is recorded in three different places within scripture (II Kings 18:13-19:37, II Chronicles 32:1-23 and Isaiah 36:1-37:38).

Hezekiah stared in horror at the unbelievable sight before him. Peering over the battlements of the city of Jerusalem, the king saw the giant Assyrian army which had surrounded the city the night before. It numbered into the hundreds of thousands, while garrisoned behind the walls of Jerusalem stood only a handful of men – the remnants of Judah's army. Suddenly from the Assyrian army stepped a lone man who strode to the walls of Jerusalem. It was the Rabshakeh, the commanding general of Sennacherib's army.



The Rabshakeh flung down words of challenge to Yahweh. Speaking to the people of Judah, the general aid, “Do not let Hezekiah make you rely on Yahweh by saying, ‘Yahweh will surely deliver us, and this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria’ . . . Has any of the gods of the nations ever delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? . . . Who among all the gods of the countries have delivered their countries out of my hand, that Yahweh should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?” (II Kings 18:30, 33, 35)? With these words, the Rabshakeh presented a scroll demanding Hezekiah’s unconditional surrender.

Alone, in the temple of God, Hezekiah read the scroll demanding his surrender. With a cry of desperation, he spread the scroll open before the throne of God, lay upon the ground, and prayed. As he prayed, the prophet Isaiah came to Hezekiah and spoke God’s word to him.

“Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel: I have heard your prayer to me about King Sennacherib of Assyria. . . . Therefore thus says Yahweh concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come into this city, shoot an arrow there, come before it with a shield, or cast up a siege ramp against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return; he shall not come into this city, says Yahweh. For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David” (II Kings 19:20, 32-34).

Almost twenty-five years after speaking God’s word to King Ahaz, Isaiah gave the same advice to Hezekiah: take heed, be quiet, do not fear – Yahweh will deliver. Unlike Ahaz, Hezekiah chose to believe God rather than men. The king went to his palace, ate his dinner, and went to bed, firmly believing that God would deliver him. Facing Judah’s worst crisis, the king trusted God to rescue his people.

And Yahweh did rescue them! The Bible states, “That very night the angel of Yahweh set out and struck down (slew) one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies. Then King Sennacherib of Assyria left, went home, and lived at Ninevah” (II Kings 19:35-36).

Next to the rescue of Israel at the Reed Sea, this event is considered God’s greatest act of deliverance. It was a miracle, for God had acted precisely in that time and place to deliver Judah from certain destruction. What happened was clear-cut proof that Yahweh reigned supreme in the universe and could rescue his people from the most impossible of situations.

The nation was saved because of Hezekiah’s trust in God. Hezekiah took Yahweh at his word. He trusted in God to deliver his people, and God did deliver. Because of Hezekiah’s previous faithfulness in bringing religious, social and political reform, and because of his trust in God rather than in human machinations, Judah was rescued.

This story – the second most important rescue story of the Jewish nation – presents a clear correlation between the responsible actions of political, economic and spiritual leaders and God’s intervention in our destiny. Ahaz would not have been so rescued as was Hezekiah! Hezekiah had sought to be a responsible king, according to the guidelines for Israelite kingship as laid out in Deuteronomy 17:14-20. He was willing to be Yahweh’s vice-regent, living frugally and not ostentatiously, not exploiting his people or using them to build his own power

and wealth, working for their economic good and to do all this in the light of God's call to him to practice a politics of justice. Most of all, Hezekiah had been willing to heed Isaiah's advice, "In returning (to reliance upon God rather than depending on foreign alliances) and rest (centering in the constancy of God's dependability) you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength" (Isa. 30:15). Thus, Hezekiah had combined both a commitment to working to build a free and just nation, but doing so in a quiet dependence upon God and God's utter trustworthiness. And God would honor such a commitment – and did so, by miraculously rescuing Hezekiah and all Judah from almost certain annihilation by Assyria.

Intriguingly, history attests this event! Sennacherib, who was an immensely boastful man, wrote of this event, "As for Hezekiah, the Jew . . . like a caged bird, I shut (him) up in Jerusalem, his royal city".<sup>8</sup> Sennacherib always described in detail the capture of the royal city of each king and that king's ultimate deposition. But of Hezekiah, Sennacherib had only the above to say. Judah's king might have been shut up like a caged bird, but it was as a very safe bird! For Sennacherib's own words tell us that the Assyrian emperor had not taken Jerusalem!

What actually happened? No one knows. An Egyptian record states that the Assyrian army was invaded that night by swarms of rats, and a considerably later Israelite source suggests the Assyrian camp was struck by bubonic plague. This incident emphasizes once more than the Jews did not interpret a miracle as an unexplainable, supernatural event, but rather as a God-controlled event, used by God to advance God's work in the world.

## **II CHRONICLES 32:1-23; 36:20-21**

**II Chronicles 32:1-23.** Isaiah the prophet came out of his self-imposed exile after the death of King Ahaz, who had chosen to accept subordination to and becoming a vassal state of the Assyrian Empire rather than to trust in God for Judah's deliverance. In making this choice, King Ahaz had rejected the prophetic advice of Isaiah to trust in Yahweh for the deliverance of the nation. Instead, he had chosen to trust in the power of Assyria and thus compromise with them.

Upon King Ahaz' death, however, Isaiah came out of exile to speak to Israel's new king. Hezekiah was now on Judah's throne, and Isaiah soon caught his ear. Hezekiah, inspired by the desire to be "God's man", began a reformation in Judah's life which returned the country to obedience to their covenants with Yahweh, eliminated syncretism (worship of Assyria's gods and of the Canaanite gods as well as of Yahweh), and guaranteed social justice for all.

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<sup>8</sup> Sennacherib, as quoted by Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia II*, paragraph 240, published 1926-27; also see Jack Finegan, *Light From the Ancient Past* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 177.

reform by standardizing weights and measures, thus causing a more fair and equitable distribution of wealth.

Finally, when Sargon II died in 705 BCE, Hezekiah refused to pay tribute to Assyria. In the chaos which always followed the death of an Assyrian emperor, Hezekiah rebelled against his conquerors. His army moved north into Assyrian territory, taking land which once belonged to his forefather, David.

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At any rate, Sennacherib eventually sought to complete the war against Hezekiah. He took Judah's main fortress, Lachish, and pushed on to Jerusalem. There one of the most significant events in Judah's history took place – an event so significant that it is recorded in three different places within scripture (II Kings 18:13-19:37, II Chronicles 32:1-23 and Isaiah 36:1-37:38).

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The Rabshakeh flung down words of challenge to Yahweh. Speaking to the people of Judah, the general said, "On what are you relying, that you undergo the siege of Jerusalem? Is not Hezekiah misleading you, handing you over to die by famine and by thirst, when he tells you, 'The Lord our God will save us from the hand of the king of Assyria?' . . . Do you not know what I and my ancestors have done to all the peoples of other lands? Were the gods of the nations of those lands at all able to save their lands out of my hand? Who among all the gods of those nations that my ancestors utterly destroyed was able to save his people from my hand, that your God should be able to save you from my hand" (II Chronicles 32:10b-11, 13-14)? With these words, the Rabshakeh presented a scroll demanding Hezekiah's unconditional surrender.

Alone, in the temple of God, Hezekiah read the scroll. With a cry of desperation, he spread the scroll open before the throne of God, lay upon the ground, and prayed. Thus, the Chronicler tells us, "Then King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz prayed because of this and cried to heaven" (32:20). How would God answer their prayers?

Almost twenty-five years after speaking God's word to King Ahaz, Isaiah gave the same advice to Hezekiah: take heed, be quiet, do not fear – Yahweh will deliver. Unlike Ahaz, Hezekiah chose to believe God rather than men. The king went to his palace, ate his dinner, and

went to bed, firmly believing that God would deliver him. Facing Judah's worst crisis, the king trusted God to rescue his people.

And Yahweh did rescue them! The Bible states, "And the Lord sent an angel who cut off all the mighty warriors and commanders and officers in the camp of the king of Assyria. So (Sennacherib) returned in disgrace to his own land. So the Lord saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the hand of King Sennacherib of Assyria and from the hand of all his enemies; God gave them rest on every side" (32:21-22).

Next to the rescue of Israel at the Reed Sea, this event is considered God's greatest act of deliverance in the Old Testament. It was a miracle, for God had acted precisely in that time and place to deliver Judah from certain destruction. What happened was clear-cut proof that Yahweh reigned supreme in the universe and could rescue his people from the most impossible of situations.

The nation was saved because of Hezekiah's trust in God. Hezekiah took Yahweh at his word. He trusted in God to deliver his people, and God did deliver. Because of Hezekiah's previous faithfulness in bringing religious, social and political reform, and because of his trust in God rather than in human machinations, Judah was rescued.

This story – the second most important rescue story of the Jewish nation – presents a clear correlation between the responsible actions of political, economic and spiritual leaders and God's intervention in our destiny. Ahaz would not have been so rescued as was Hezekiah! Hezekiah had sought to be a responsible king, according to the guidelines for Israelite kingship as laid out in Deuteronomy 17:14-20. He was willing to be Yahweh's vice-regent, living frugally and not ostentatiously, not exploiting his people or using them to build his own power and wealth, working for their economic good and to do all this in the light of God's call to him to practice a politics of justice. Most of all, Hezekiah had been willing to heed Isaiah's advice, "In returning (to reliance upon God rather than depending on foreign alliances) and rest (centering in the constancy of God's dependability) you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength" (Isa. 30:15). Thus, Hezekiah had combined both a commitment to working to build a free and just nation, but doing so in a quiet dependence upon God and God's utter trustworthiness. And God would honor such a commitment – and did so, by miraculously rescuing Hezekiah and all Judah from almost certain annihilation by Assyria.

Intriguingly, history attests this event! Sennacherib, who was an immensely boastful man, wrote of this event, "As for Hezekiah, the Jew . . . like a caged bird, I shut (him) up in Jerusalem, his royal city".<sup>9</sup> Sennacherib always described in detail the capture of the royal city of each king and that king's ultimate deposition. But of Hezekiah, Sennacherib had only the above to say. Judah's king might have been shut up like a caged bird, but it was as a very safe bird! For Sennacherib's own words tell us that the Assyrian emperor had not taken Jerusalem!

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<sup>9</sup> Sennacherib, as quoted by Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia II*, paragraph 240, published 1926-27; also see Jack Finegan, *Light From the Ancient Past* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 177.

What actually happened? No one knows. An Egyptian record states that the Assyrian army was invaded that night by swarms of rats, and a considerably later Israelite source suggests the Assyrian camp was struck by bubonic plague. This incident emphasizes once more than the Jews did not interpret a miracle as an unexplainable, supernatural event, but rather as a God-controlled event, used by God to advance God's work in the world.

**II Chronicles 36:20-21** concludes the history of the southern kingdom of Judah with these words: "The Lord, the God of Israel's ancestors, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place; but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord against his people became so great that there was no remedy.

"Therefore, God brought up against Judah the king of the Chaldeans (Babylonians), who killed their youths with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young men or young women, the aged or the feeble; he gave them all into his hand. All the vessels of the house of God, large and small, and the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king and of his officials, all these he brought to Babylon. They burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious vessels. Nebuchadrezzar took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia" (II Chron. 36:15-20).

Thus ended the nation of Judah. It was not only defeated but destroyed, its capital city burned to the ground, its walls leveled and its temple razed. Once the nation had been both captured and decimated, the king of the Babylonians took out from the nation all its actual and potential leaders who had "escaped the sword", and brought them to Babylon to become his servants. Thus was the end of the southern kingdom of Judah and all that was left of David's Israel.

But why? Why had Judah been so thoroughly destroyed? What the author of II Chronicles states is absolutely startling. "Nebuchadrezzar took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they become servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, ***until the land had made up for its Sabbaths!*** All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years" (36:20-21).

The reason Israel had to be in exile seventy years was that it had failed to keep the sabbatical year seventy times – or, in other words, for 490 years. Therefore, one way or another, God would require of the nation that sabbatical rest and redistribution of wealth – if not voluntarily, then by force. But one way or another, Israel ***would*** keep Sabbath!

This statement by the author of II Chronicles exemplifies how important the Sabbatical rhythm of the nation was to the Israelites. It was not simply a mechanical device to mark days, weeks, months and years. It was the *raison d'être* of the nation, the very justification for their existence as a people and nation. They existed for Yahweh and therefore to be Yahweh's

community of shalom. And that shalom could be lived out only by the nation intentionally and consistently living out the Sabbath. That meant stopping work one day each week in order to worship God and enjoy their families. It meant setting aside every seventh month for a month's long "holiday" from work in order to be on retreat before God and with the family. It meant committing every seventh year to letting their fields lie fallow, to forgiving all accumulated debts and to freeing all slaves. And it meant observing the seventh sabbatical year (49<sup>th</sup> year) as a Jubilee when all the land would be returned to its original owners. The entire sabbatical cycle had been created to put both money and work "in its place" – not as the highest of humanity's ambitions but as one of the lowest, to redistribute the wealth of the nation in order to decimate poverty, and to place the focus of Jewish society on the worship of God and the building of a relational culture (i.e., enjoyment of all human relationships but particular spouse and family). Only in this way could a shalom community be truly constructed.

Thus, the Sabbatical laws were not simply just like all other laws of Israel. They were the foundational laws of Israel that made that people unique among the ancient civilizations. Therefore they must be obeyed or the nation would abandon its unique covenant with God, and would simply become like all the other nations of the world. So it was that God would insist that the nation would keep all its Sabbaths – even if it had to be destroyed and put into exile to be thus forced to keep its Sabbaths!

The author of II Chronicles reports that the destroyed Israel would remain in Babylonian captivity for seventy years, "until the land had made up for its Sabbaths". Why seventy years? It was because the people of Israel had abandoned the keeping of the sabbatical year 490 years earlier. They had not kept it seventy times. So one must inevitably ask, "What happened 490 years earlier that caused the people to abandon their sabbatical years and Jubilee legislations?"

Judah was finally conquered and destroyed by the Babylonian Empire in 586 BCE. 490 years earlier would have been 1076 BCE. What happened around 1076 BCE? What happened was the ending of Israel's government by judges, and the establishment of the monarchy under King Saul. It was a significant change in Israel's government – far more than simply a change of the form of government.

The highly-decentralized form of government – leadership by God-appointed temporary judges (technically called an "amphictyony"<sup>10</sup>) was Israel's government because it was essential to the worship and service of Yahweh; it made God alone the "king" of Israel. But the amphictyony had proved itself incapable of coping with the effort of the Philistines to conquer Canaan. Therefore, the leaders demanded that Israel's political life be reorganized under a monarchy.

The biblical text makes it clear how severe an issue this issue was. It says, "Samuel prayed to the Lord (about this matter), and the Lord said to Samuel, Listen 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" (I Samuel 8:7).

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<sup>10</sup> An amphictyony is defined as "an association of neighboring states for their common interest, usually surrounding a common religious shrine".

The monarchy proved to become what Samuel feared it would be. The king would build a standing army, severely tax the people both to maintain it and to sustain the king's court, take possession of all the best land, and Israel would soon find itself with its own "pharaoh" dominating and controlling the nation. God would have become irrelevant! And the Sabbatical would become a practice of the past (for a more thorough explanation of the movement from amphictyony to monarchy, see Linthicum's commentary on I Samuel 8:4-20 – Cycle B Ordinary Time 10).

And that is exactly what happened. Whereas there are many signs in the books of Joshua, Judges and Ruth of the Sabbath day, month, year and Jubilee being kept (for example, Boaz' treatment of Ruth is built upon Sabbatical Year understanding), there is no indication in the books telling of the Jewish monarchy of any observance of Sabbatical law. Thus, the Sabbath day, month, year and Jubilee were no longer observed, and both Judah and Israel moved steadily toward becoming inequitable nations, politically oppressive, economically exploitive, an escalating permanent peasant and expendable classes, and pressing God into the background. That was why the nation's defeat was absolutely essential, and why they needed to stay in exile 70 years, so that "the land would make up for its Sabbaths"!

One more point needs to be made on II Chronicles 36:20-21. The Chronicler wrote of Judah's entering into Babylonian conquest and captivity, but then adds "to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had made up for its Sabbaths". To what is this enigmatic statement referring?

Near the end of his ministry and after Babylonia's conquest of Judah, Jeremiah the prophet, who was still living in the ruins of the destroyed Jerusalem, wrote a pastoral letter to the Hebrew captives exiled in Babylon (Jeremiah 29:4-11). In this letter, he tells the captives not to live the remainder of their lives mourning for Jerusalem, but rather to settle in to Babylon, to make their homes and build their families there, and to concentrate upon working for the shalom of that city. Forget, he says, about returning home – because it isn't going to happen. And why won't it happen? Jeremiah writes, "For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place" (Jer. 29:10).

Yahweh's promise to the Israelite exiles seems harsh! Through Jeremiah, God tells them that they will remain in exile for seventy years – or, in other words, a lifetime! They will not be restored to their precious city of Jerusalem. Likely, neither will their children. Only in their grandchildren lies the hope that Israel will once again be restored to its land. And why? Israel had to remain in exile for seventy years because it had failed to observe the Sabbatical Year (and, consequently, the Jubilee) seventy times. So, until those "seventy years are completed" and Israel has kept the sabbatical – one way or another – there would be no return. This statement by Jeremiah was what the Chronicler was referring to when he wrote, "to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah" (for a more thorough examination of the Jeremiah 29 text, see Linthicum's commentary on Jeremiah 29:1-7[Cycle C Ordinary Time 28])!

Thus, the author of I and II Chronicles demonstrates both clearly and profoundly to the reader the absolute centrality and importance of Israel's sabbatical laws – and the clear instruction that you don't mess with God!

### **EZRA 10:9-17**

**Ezra 10:9-17.** Ezra was the high priest of Israel during the governorship of Nehemiah, the former cup-bearer to the Persian emperor. Ezra and Nehemiah worked closely with each other to bring about the reformation in Israelite life and culture so necessary for the survival of that nation. They built that reformation around a strict application of the Deuteronomic law code to Israelite life. That application took the form of a covenant made between the people and God (Neh. 9:38-10:39).

The covenant begins, "We enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord and his ordinances and his statutes:

1. We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons;
2. If the peoples of the land bring in merchandise or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy it;
3. We will forego the crops of the seventh year;
4. We will forego the exaction of every debt;
5. We also lay on ourselves the obligation to charge ourselves yearly for the service of the house of our God;
6. We will cast our lots so that we all share in the care of the Temple;
7. We obligate ourselves to bring the first fruits of all our produce and of our wealth to support the three major festivals at the Temple and to redistribute wealth;
8. We will tithe the firstborn of our sons and of our livestock in order to repopulate Jerusalem" (Neh. 10:28-11:2).<sup>11</sup>

This covenant assumes certain values -- the values of the Deuteronomic code and, consequently, of pre-exilic Israel. Those values include: (1) the centering of the entire life of the community and of each individual Israelite in a vital relationship with God that is acted out in the worship of God; (2) a politics of compensatory justice that is concerned with the protection and equalization of the vulnerable of that society; (3) an economics of stewardship of the wealth both of the community and of each family in order that poverty might be eliminated and wealth be distributed equitably; (4) maintenance of racial and ethnic purity (see the third paragraph below). What is most important to note, however, is that each stipulation of the Nehemiah-Ezra covenant was an attempt to apply Deuteronomic Law to the creating of this newly-emerging Jewish state,

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<sup>11</sup> Nehemiah 10:28-39, 11:1-2. Besides numbering the agreements of the covenant (which is not in the text) and excerpting the critical verses, I have paraphrased some of the commitments either because they were too lengthy to include in their entirety or because of the use of cultic language that makes them initially obscure.



so that the nation was built upon Torah legislation that was designed to create the shalom community.<sup>12</sup>

But it is one thing to make a promise, and another to keep it. Once Israel determined the values upon which they would build this Jewish community and covenanted together to keep them, did they? The evidence is clear that they did. But whereas covenant stipulations 2 through 7 are self-evident actions needed to sustain and preserve the Jewish community, the first stipulation seems unnecessarily repressive. How can we understand and be responsive to a stipulation that seems to require the break-up of marriages and the separation of families?

Covenant stipulation #1 is, “We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons” (10:30). Was such a harsh requirement obeyed? Neh. 13:3 tells us, “When the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent.” In other words, all marriages between Israelites and people of other ethnic groups were, indeed, dissolved!

That this actually happened is confirmed by Ezra 10:9-17, the report being introduced with the words, “Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have trespassed and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now make confession to the Lord the God of your ancestors, and do his will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives” (Ezra 10:10-11).

On the face of it, this action on the part of Ezra and Israel to expel foreigners from the Jewish community and to maintain the ethnic purity of Israel seems both immoral and cruel. Presumably, many of the couples forced to divorce loved each other, and families were torn asunder by this action. This action would have created economic and personal misery for many. The decision by the people to appoint a special commission<sup>13</sup> of laypeople to investigate each case (Ezra 9:14-19) indicated the desire by the people to find extenuating circumstances to prevent as many divorces as possible. But it is important to understand what this admittedly radical action was seeking to accomplish.

A persistent problem in Israel was the seductive nature of the gods of other nations who would woo Israel away from the far-more exacting nature of Yahweh, who demanded responsibility in public and private life rather than license. In Deuteronomy, for example, a clear differentiation was made between “aliens” or “foreigners” (Dt. 14:21; 15:3; 23:20; 31:16) and

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<sup>12</sup> The Deuteronomic antecedents of the Nehemiah-Ezra covenant were as follows: Stipulation # 1: Deuteronomy 25:1-10; #2: Deut. 5:12-15; # 3: Deut. 15:1-19; #4: Deut. 15:1-19; #5: Deut. 12:1-19; #6: Deut. 14:22-29; # 7: Deut. 16:1-17. The apparent dependency of this covenant upon the stipulations of Deuteronomy is what gives credence to the argument that the “book of the law” referred to in Nehemiah 8 and 9 is Deuteronomy.

<sup>13</sup> The first session of the commission was held on the first day of the tenth month (December 29) and ended on the first day of the first month (March 27). In other words, the commission hearings took three months, and in that time investigated all the men who had married foreign women. The reason why elders and judges were present from the town of each accused man was so that they would share with Ezra responsibility for the forthcoming divorces and the consequences of those divorces. In reality, according to the figures given in the book of Ezra, the number was not great. Only 110 men actually divorced their wives. This is 0.58% of the clergy and about 0.67% of the laity, based on the figures given in Ezra 2. Cf. Klein, Ralph W., “Ezra”, *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), pp. 667-668.

“strangers” or “sojourners” (Dt. 10:17-19; 14:28-29; 16:11-12; 26:4-15). The stranger or sojourner (also translated in the NRSV as “resident alien”) was a non-Israelite who lived permanently in Israel and who embraced the worship of Yahweh. The alien or foreigner was a non-Jew who either resided temporarily or permanently in Israel but was a believer in another god than Yahweh. As a believer in one of the Ba’als, he was a profound threat to Israel because his values were totally different than were the values of an Israelite truly committed to Yahweh. Whereas the Israelite was to be committed to a relational God of love and justice who called him to act justly and to equitably distribute wealth, the “alien” or “foreigner”, precisely because he was committed to Ba’al, was also committed to a politics of power leading to the oppression of people and an economics of greed leading to the exploitation of people. The two sets of values could not exist side-by-side in Israel, because they would thoroughly conflict with each other.

The issue that stood before the Israel of Ezra’s and Nehemiah’s day, when its people considered the embracing of the Deuteronomic code as the foundation of their society, was the question of what to do with married couples where one was an Israelite and the other was a foreigner. Presumably, the reason for the commission was to determine, case-by-case, whether the non-Israelite in the marriage was a “stranger” or a “foreigner”, a “sojourner” or an “alien”. Was that non-Israelite participating in the worship of Yahweh and therefore embracing the Mosaic covenant? Or was this non-Israelite loyal to another god than Yahweh and therefore committed to a politics of domination and an economics of exploitation that would undermine Israel? The indication from the book of Ezra is that there were only 110 divorces while, presumably, there were many more mixed marriages (Ezra 10:13). The adjudication likely hinged on whether the non-Israelite spouse was a stranger or an alien.

What this shocking action dramatically illustrates to us was the primacy of the community either over the individual or the family. It was the preservation and integrity of the community that was primary – not the preservation of a marriage. Families would be born and would die – just like individuals. But the community would have to continue on. And if a marriage in any way jeopardized the continuous of or spiritual integrity of the community, it would have to be dissolved. That was the principle priority of post-exilic Israel.

### **NEHEMIAH 1:1-11; 2:1-16; 2:17-18; 3:1—5:13; 6:15-16**

Along with Deuteronomy, the book of Nehemiah is one of the most important books in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). Whereas Deuteronomy presents the vision and the specific instructions for implementing God’s intentions for Israel, Nehemiah presents how that vision was actually realized in post-exilic Israel. The book is divided into two parts. Chapters 1:1 through 6:16 deal with the people’s rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, thus securing their existence as a nation. Chapters 6:17-13:31 deal with the rebuilding of the corporate life of the nation of Israel, as the people build for themselves a nation that conforms as closely as they can make it to the intent and the vision, the “statutes and ordinances” of Deuteronomy. Both portions of the book are covered in the material that follows and the lectionary selections in this study.

Who was Nehemiah? He was a Jew (c. 465 – 400 BCE). But the text also tells us that he “was cupbearer to the king” of Persia (Neh 1:11b). Those few words, so casually mentioned, belie his actual position. Nehemiah was one of the highest government officials in the largest empire of its time – an empire that had its origins in present-day Iran but which stretched, in Nehemiah’s time, from the western border of India through the Turkish peninsula to the Mediterranean Sea, from the Caspian and Black Seas in the north to the northeast border of Egypt. As cupbearer to the king, Nehemiah was the personal servant of the Persian emperor Artaxerxes. He both tested and served the great king his wine each day, met daily with the king regarding affairs of state, and in essence, played the role of the prime minister of the Persian Empire. He was well rewarded for this service, having both wealth and influence in the empire.

Nehemiah understood power and the exercise of power – whether unilateral (i.e., top-down) or relational (i.e., people to people). When he learned of the plight of the Jews in Jerusalem, his objective became that of enabling those Jews to develop the capacity, ability and willingness to act to change their situation. This is the story of how he organized the people of Israel, first, to rebuild their capital city’s walls and then, second, to rebuild the political, economic and spiritual order of their country so that they could become a self-sufficient and God-dependent nation.

**Nehemiah 1:1-11.** I was in my study one afternoon in 1971 in the inner-city church I pastored in Chicago when there was a knock on my door. When I answered it, I found 20 elderly ladies wanting to speak with me. I was well acquainted with these ladies because they gathered at my church twice a week to sew bandages for a leprosarium and to enjoy each other’s company. Obviously, something had motivated them to leave their work and come downstairs to meet with me. So I ushered them into my study and asked, “How can I help you ladies?” And with such an invitation, these ladies began to spill out their tale of woe.

“Pastor Bob,” their spokeswoman, Vivian said, “we ladies have lived most of our lives in this community. We all raised our families here. This was a wonderful community in which to raise children. We saw them graduate from high school; many of them got married in our churches. We brought our grandchildren here to be baptized. And some of us have buried our husbands from here. All our lives are bound up with this community.”

I nodded sympathetically. But Vivian pressed on. “But now our community is being taken away from us. We are afraid of this neighborhood in which we have lived our lives.”

“How’s that?” I asked.

“Crime!” The answer came swiftly, even biting. “Crime. We just made a horrible discovery up in the sewing room. We just discovered that every one of us twenty ladies has been the personal victim of crime in the past six months. Some of us have had our purses snatched, some of us have been accosted, some of us have had our homes broken into, one of us was robbed at knifepoint in her very own home. The crime and purse-snatching and prostitution and harassment has gotten so bad that we are afraid to go out on the streets of our own neighborhood – even during the day. Pastor Bob, what are you going to do about it?”

What was I going to do about it? I didn't know what I could do about the crime, prostitution and decay of this community. But there they stood – 20 very determined ladies. And I had to come up with a response. I began thinking fast!

“Ladies,” I replied, “I don't know what to do about crime here. But I know someone who does – Bob the organizer. Let's go to him and you can tell him the story you just told me.”

They agreed. So I called Bob, and warned him that 20 angry ladies and I were coming over to see him. Then we walked down the street to the office of the Organization of the North East (ONE).

Bob the organizer met us at the door and ushered us into the ONE meeting room. He got the ladies seated. And then he asked an entirely different question than I had asked.

“Ladies,” he asked, “what's your problem?”

“What's our problem? I'll tell you our problem,” Vivian replied. And then she began her recital of these ladies' concern all over again. I waited in breathless anticipation for the punch line to come. And come it did!

“Mr. Bob, what are you going to do about it?”

The organizer's response hit me like a profound wake-up call. That response began a conversion experience within me – a conversion of understanding ministry, not as helping and serving people, but as equipping people to help themselves. This was the organizer's answer.

“I'm not going to do anything about it! It's not my problem. It's your problem. What are *you* going to do about it?”

“What are *we* going to do about it?” Vivian indignantly answered. “What can we do about it? We're nothing but little old ladies!”

“You may be little old ladies,” Bob the organizer responded. “But you are NOT ‘nothing but little old ladies’! You are very powerful little old ladies. And if you want to do something to stop crime in this community, you can!”

“But we don't know what to do”, Vivian answered.

“Of course you don't know what to do,” Bob shot back, “because if you had known what to do, you would have already done it, and there wouldn't be the problem of crime in this neighborhood that you face today. But that's my job as an organizer -- to help you to figure out what to do and to train you to do it. The point is, however, that if you want crime to disappear from this neighborhood, *you have to make it stop yourself!*”

Then Bob the organizer drove his message home to the ladies. “It comes down to a simple choice, ladies. Do you really want to stop crime in this neighborhood? Or do you simply

want to stand around and complain how bad it is? Will you or won't you take charge of stopping crime in this neighborhood. That's what I want to know from you."

The ladies looked at each other. And then Vivian answered for them all. "We want to stop it!" "Okay," responded the organizer. "Let's get to work!"

And to work they got! Trained by Bob the organizer how to recognize, accept and use the power at their disposal, those "little old ladies" organized all the little old ladies and all the little old men of that community – hundreds upon hundreds of them – to confront the precinct captain and eventually to negotiate directly with the Chief of Police to get the Chicago Police Department to increase the number of police patrols in that neighborhood, to organize "Neighborhood Watches" on each block, and to get cops walking beats for the first time in 37 years. Crime plummeted overnight, and those little old ladies won back their community and safety once again!

As I look back on this incident, I realize that those "little old ladies" felt powerless – not because they were powerless, but because they *perceived* themselves as powerless! They didn't discern the relationships they had built over the years as a base of power. Therefore they viewed themselves as victims rather than the victors they had the potential to be.

But also, in a profound sense, I was powerless as well! As a pastor, I felt helpless to help them with their problem. And I felt helpless because: (1) I didn't have a sufficient understanding or experience in using power to help them deal with their exploitation; (2) I didn't really understand the Iron Rule!

How did Bob the organizer work with these little old ladies to equip them to build their power and rid that neighborhood of crime? He did it by getting these ladies to embrace in their actions and reflections the Iron Rule: "Never do for others what they can do for themselves." Rather than "doing" for these ladies, Bob's job was to get them to assume responsibility for solving their issue themselves, using their own capacity, ability and willingness to do so.

What Bob the organizer later explained to me was that, since power is the capacity, ability and willingness to act, the problem of the ladies was that they perceived themselves as neither having the capacity or ability to rid that neighborhood of crime. And because they believed they didn't have the capacity or ability to act, they lacked the willingness to act, as well. This is the essential problem of most people that keeps them from bringing about the significant change they have the capacity to bring about.

The ladies didn't know how to deal with the unilateral power of City Hall or of the Chicago Police Department. They lacked the skills and abilities to confront, negotiate or hold accountable such power. Instead, they were intimidated by it. So one of the tasks that Bob the organizer had was to teach the ladies how to develop their ability to act.

But the more serious problem was that the ladies didn't recognize their capacity to act. They understood power only in terms of force, dominance and control. And they certainly didn't have that kind of capacity in public life. But, in reality, they had great social capital at their

disposal because between the twenty of them, they had built relationships over the years with hundreds upon hundreds of people in their neighborhood and throughout Chicago. Because they had always perceived those relationships as private – that is, as personal, friendly and supportive, they had never attempted to use those relationships in public life. Now it was time for them to call upon those investments in people, and use those relationships to build power!

What would Bob the organizer do to build the capacity and ability of these little old ladies? How would Bob organize them to become people of power? He would use the strategies and tactics of Nehemiah for building power.

The story of Nehemiah begins with these words: “In the month of Chislew, in the twentieth year (of King Artaxerxes), while I was in Susa the capital, one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem. They replied, “The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.” When I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven” (Neh 1:1-4).

### ***Begin by Building Relationships***

The first step Nehemiah took to empower Israel in this time of great vulnerability and apparent helplessness was to *build relationships*. And he did this by *asking questions* and *listening*. He began by asking his brother and “certain men from Judah” who had come to visit him in the Persian capital, “How is it going with the Jews that survived the Babylonian captivity, and how is it in Jerusalem” (1:2)? What Nehemiah heard, in response, was an earful!

When the great Persian king, Cyrus, conquered the Babylonian empire in 539 BCE, he reversed the Babylonian policy regarding political captives. In order to maintain its control over conquered nations, Babylonia brought to its capital city the political, economic and religious leadership of each nation it conquered; it did this with Israel and its “Babylonian captivity”. When Cyrus overthrew the Babylonian empire, he allowed those of the captive elite to return to their countries on the condition that they would provide leadership to those countries under the authority of the Persian crown. A significant number of Israelite captives thus returned home to Judah and its capital city, Jerusalem. These people and their descendants was whom Nehemiah was asking about, together with all those who had remained behind in Jerusalem.

What Nehemiah heard was that the people were in trouble. As he talked with Hanani and many others, the grave situation Israel faced clearly emerged. Both the Jewish leadership and the people were in profound despair, he was told. Those in Babylonian exile had returned to see that Jerusalem was only a shadow of its former self. It was essentially a razed city, with the people making do as best they could among its ruins. The city’s walls were broken down, leaving its citizens vulnerable to the lightning raids of tribal peoples who would come sweeping in from the Arabian desert to loot, pillage and rape. The economy was a shambles, and the primary political authority was being exercised by Gentiles who were economically exploiting the people. The nation was in a vast, corporate depression as all that had made them uniquely Jewish had been taken from them, and they no longer had either a national or a spiritual identity as a people.

What is significant is what Nehemiah does about all this bad news. He simply keeps asking questions, probing, and listening to the stories people have to tell. But he doesn't seem to do anything other than asking questions and listening. He appears to be doing nothing! But, in reality, Nehemiah is doing a great deal.

The “Iron Rule” is “Never do for others what they can do for themselves.” If you want people to take charge of their own situation and to solve their own problems, the way to do that is not for you to determine the solution to their problems and implement it. All that will do is to create dependency. The way that you get them to do for themselves is to get them to publicly articulate with each other their problem so that they get angry enough to do something about it. And the way you get them to articulate these problems is to ask questions and listen to their responses. Relational power can only be built upon relationships between people, and listening to and sharing with each other builds such relationships. That was what Nehemiah was doing.

But he was doing more than that!

### ***Internalize the Pain***

The text tells us that Nehemiah not only asked questions and listened to the people. He also “sat down and wept, and mourned for days” (1:4). Nehemiah allowed his heart to be broken by the things that were breaking the hearts of his people!

It is not enough for the organizer, community worker or the pastor to listen and learn from the people. In order to build the depth of relationships upon which relational power is based, one must allow the people's pain to become her or his pain! And that means allowing the anger and frustration of the people to connect with your anger!

Christians have trouble with anger. We tend to think of anger as inappropriate for the Christian life and witness because we believe that we ought to be loving, caring and “happy all the time”. But anger is absolutely essential for bringing about any change.

To understand the nature of anger, we need to recognize that the word “anger” comes from the Norse word for “grief”! Authentic anger is the process of grieving over the injustice our people are facing, and connecting that injustice with the pain we have experienced in our own lives. All of us have experienced injustice in our lives, when we were dominated, oppressed or exploited in ways that diminished our sense of our own worth and self-respect. Those incidents may be overwhelming (such as Israel's oppression under Egyptian slavery) or may seem trivial to someone else (like being made to clean up someone else's mess at summer camp) – but it is still injustice to us that made us feel less of a human being. Our response may have been rage or tears or frustration or grief – but all of these are simply manifestations of anger. Anger is an essential part of human life, and to deny it is for us to deny our humanity!

Organizers are fond of differentiating between “hot anger” and “cold anger”. Hot anger is the immediate response of anger one feels to an unjust situation – it is literally a flush of heat! If you respond to that flush of hot anger, your response will tend to be immediate, visceral, unconscious, and not thought through. It will, therefore, likely be destructive. Cold anger, on

the other hand, is anger that is nurtured, that is allowed to ferment inside of us as we lay our emotions aside and begin to examine the injustice in a cognitive, reasoned way. In that greater reflection, we will decide what would be the most productive way of responding that will accomplish the greatest benefit. When we say after we have responded out of hot anger, “I wish I would have thought of saying . . .”, we are actually saying, “I wish I had allowed my anger to cool down so that I could have acted in a way that would have gotten the results I wanted to get”.

When Nehemiah first heard of the plight of his brother and sister Jews thousands of miles away in Jerusalem, he likely felt hot anger. But he gave himself time to reflect upon it while continuing to talk to other Jews coming to Susa, so that, gradually, the problem shifted from being the Jew’s problem to becoming Nehemiah’s problem, as well.

### ***Pray for the People***

But Nehemiah did more than weep and mourn. The text tells us that he “fasted and prayed before the God of heaven” (1:4), and then presents a sample of his prayers (1:5-11a). Prayer was a strategic part of the process by which Nehemiah prepared both himself and the Jewish people (although they did not know it) for the great work of liberation God would do through them.

It is instructive to examine Nehemiah’s model prayer for Israel (1:5-11a) for insights about the role of prayer in the building of relational power. The opening of Nehemiah’s prayer is a *prayer of intercession*, simply bringing the plight of the people before God. And why? Was it that God needed to be convinced that his people were in trouble? Hardly! God was well aware of “the trouble we are in” (2:17). But God wanted *Nehemiah* to be aware of that trouble, and to incarnate that trouble into the very pores of his being. Thus, just as is grief, anger and reflection, prayer is often for the purpose of awakening within us the pain of the injustice others are facing so that we are willing to join them in working for change.

Second, Nehemiah offers to God *prayers of confession*. It is significant to note that he includes himself and his family in that confession. “Hear the prayer of your servant that I pray for your servants, the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel which we have sinned before you. *Both I and my family have sinned*” (1:6). Nehemiah doesn’t try to “white-wash” the culpability of Israel in contributing to their sorry state. Rather he is very open that “we have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses” (1:7) (i.e., they have not practiced the Deuteronomic model of the “shalom community”, cf. Neh 8-10). As God leads Nehemiah to include himself as part of the problem, this accomplishes two things. First, it is causing Nehemiah to identify with the injustice and pain of his people. Second, it enables him to identify with his people – even in their sin – and thus carry out an incarnational ministry among them.

Third, through his prayers, Nehemiah is coming to perceive the depth of the task that lies before him in building a people of power in Israel (1:9). The problem the Israelites have identified as their primary issue is their broken-down walls. That is their most immediate problem and that is where Nehemiah will organize them to start. But in this prayer, Nehemiah reveals for the first time that he is beginning to realize that the essential problem of Israel is far greater than broken down walls. It is their broken down corporate life, because they are no



longer being faithful to what it means to be a Jew – a builder of the shalom community! These are *prayers of reflection*, and it reveals to us how important prayer is as God uses our praying to speak to us, enabling us to see the scope of the mission to which he is calling us.

Finally, Nehemiah prays *prayers of supplication* (1:10-11). He asks God to give the Jews and himself clarity about what they need to do as they act in “cold anger” with carefully thought-through plans to rebuild walls and common life – and even to take the next immediate steps that must be taken to convince a king to cooperate with the will of the people!

What is significant about this sample prayer of Nehemiah’s is that it gives us insight into the process through which he was going. It enables us to see the internal work God is doing in him in order to prepare him to organize this people to rebuild their walls and their life together. For it is in his praying that Nehemiah realizes that Israel’s problem is essentially a spiritual problem, because the nation has abandoned its birthright of the shalom community!

### ***Consider Your Resources***

Chapter one ends with a peculiar sentence, “At the time, I was cupbearer to the king” (1:11b). Why is this sentence at the close of this chapter presenting God’s formation of both Nehemiah and the leaders of Israel for the “great work” that he and they are about to undertake together? It is simply because, besides listening to the people, allowing their pain to become his pain, praying for them and building relational power together with them as they listen to and learn from each other, Nehemiah must also reflect on the resources that he brings to deal with Israel’s broken-down walls. Nehemiah does not yet have the trust or commitment of the people for his leadership. He does not yet have access to the material resources he needs if the people are to rebuild the walls. He does not yet have the permission of the king. But he does have one thing – he is cupbearer to the king. And how he now uses that office will decide whether or not he will be able to organize the people of Israel to rebuild their city and their life together.

### ***Understand the Value of Timing***

Perhaps one of the most important traits in Nehemiah’s leadership of this organizing effort was his consummate sense of timing. Here, in chapter one, we see it clearly at work.

The text tells us that Nehemiah first became aware of the terrible situation in Israel “in the month of Chislev in the twentieth year (of King Artaxerxes)” (1:1). The text further tells us that Nehemiah took his first step of action “in the month of Nisan in the twentieth year” (2:1). So the period between the months of Chislev and Nisan were the period of incubation – of meeting with the people, listening to their stories, reflecting on their pain, praying over the situation, considering the available resources and building the relationships. And it was not until the month of Nisan that Nehemiah finally acted! So the question must be asked, “How long was this period of preparation?”

The month of Chislev is a portion of what is, in our calendars, the latter part of October and the earliest part of November. The month of Nisan is the end of April and the early part of May. It is a six-month time-period. So Nehemiah didn’t rush into action. Instead, Nehemiah willingly took the time needed to build sufficient power to act. He did not allow himself to be rushed.

Faced with the overwhelming task of building Israel into a people of power capable of not only rebuilding their walls and city, but also rebuilding their life and spirituality as a nation, Nehemiah began with individual and small-group (house) meetings! He began by asking questions of individuals, listening to their responses, and allowing himself as well as them to be changed by the conversations he was having with them about the deepest challenge and pain in their lives and in their nation. He began to build the power of Israel by building it relationally! And he took all kinds of time to do it – six months of time. If the problem of broken-down walls had existed for 141 years, it could wait a few days longer to be solved. But without investing considerable time in meeting with people and building relationships with them, no organizing that would solve the problem would ever occur!

So, let's return to Bob the organizer. What would Bob do to build the capacity and ability of these little old ladies? How would Bob organize them to become people of power? Why, his first step was to train these ladies to do individual meetings. And then he sent them forth to visit every one of their friends. This they did in very short time, talking with them about their concern about crime in our community as well as listening to their friends regarding their concerns as well. To their surprise, they discovered that almost everyone with whom they visited was as concerned about crime as our ladies were – and many of them had also been personal victims of crime.

But building relationships to address the people's concerns required an additional step. The people the little old ladies visited needed to be brought together into small groups (or "house meetings") where they could meet each other and hear each other's stories.

In essence, a house meeting is an expanded individual meeting. It is seeking to accomplish the very same task as an individual meeting – identifying, motivating and calling forth those people who want to make a difference in their situation and are willing to risk doing something about it. But it is done in a group rather than one-on-one. It is done in a group in order to give people the opportunity to hear each other's stories, to share in the moans about the problems and concerns facing that community, to break people's sense of isolation ("I am the only one who really cares about this"), to identify others who are also concerned about these issues, and to begin to form action plans to do something about their common concerns.

The basic emphasis of a house meeting is to get people to tell their stories to each other in ways that address their common pain. Speaking out that pain publicly, listening to other people's pain, awakening curiosity, compassion and anger are all essential to the success of a house meeting. The primary objective of a house meeting is to build solidarity and community, and thus enable people to trust each other. It is therefore a strategic step in the empowering process. For it prepares people to take the next step – action!

The house meetings went extremely well. More than 40 of them were held throughout the community within a month. Most groups had between 10 and 20 people in them, all of who had been found through the individual meetings. People just plain enjoyed getting together and visiting. Sharing was deep, including not simply sharing incidents but emotions of fear and helplessness. And the very sharing of those emotions somehow began to lessen them as we

began to plan to bring safety to our community. All the elements of Nehemiah's organizing – listening to people's stories, building trust relationships with each other, sharing common and individual pain, praying together, being willing to invest considerable time in each other and considering their resources – were part of the over-1,000 individual and house meetings held by the little old ladies. And through that honest sharing with each other was growing a body of people committed to each other and to the task of addressing the issue of crime and any other issue that threatened the wellbeing of that Chicago neighborhood.

**Nehemiah 2:1-16** actually deals with the organizing task of building an action team, and conducting research actions. Without forming an action team, there will be no one to own that particular effort to work for justice in regards to the specific pain that was articulated by the people. And without research actions, the team is going into action uninformed and likely to be outmaneuvered and defeated by the powers that they are opposing!

### ***Form Action Teams***

The next step of organizing, once house meetings are being held and people are getting motivated to assume responsibility for exercising the Iron Rule (i.e., are becoming increasingly agitated to assume responsibility themselves for solving their problem), is to move toward the formation of action teams. An action team acts as the planning and implementing body for acting upon the issue at hand. Whereas house meetings work at stirring up people and institutions to take responsibility for an issue, problem or concern, and to mobilize those people for action at the appropriate time, the responsibility of the action team is to move the community organization toward action. Typically, an action team does this in two ways: by conducting research actions and by planning actions. *Research actions* are done for the purpose of gathering sufficient information to determine the points of vulnerability of the target<sup>14</sup> and to discern the most effective actions to get the response out of the targets that you desire. An *action* is the activity done by the community organization to get out of the target the decision you want from them. Normally, a community organization will have a great number of action teams simultaneously working and planning on a wide spectrum of issues and concerns.

One of the best biblical examples of research actions is that undertaken by Nehemiah, as he prepared for his action of getting the Israelites both to rebuild their walls and to rebuild their life together as God's people. In doing this research, Nehemiah conducted five research actions in which he learns a great deal about the decision makers with whom he must deal, builds his action team, but also gets some important decisions made that enable the Israelites to rebuild their walls. These research actions are found in Nehemiah 2:1-16.

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<sup>14</sup> A word needs to be said about the word "target". Community and broad-based organizations call the recipient of their action a "target". The word is very intentionally chosen. He or she is not an enemy – that is, a continuing opponent. He or she is a "target" – that person who, for the issue being acted upon, is the person who has the greatest authority to make the decision the people wants made. Once the decision is made, that person is no longer the target. In fact, the task often then becomes to build a more positive relationship with that person. Most of the government, business, educational and health/social services leaders with whom I have worked closely in most of the organizing efforts in which I have been involved began as targets! As a target, they learned that they had to take our organization seriously because of the people-power we could mobilize. Once that occurred, they then became willing – and sometimes proactive – in working with us to accomplish our mutual goals.

*Nehemiah's first research action* is on the most powerful king of his day, the emperor of the Persian Empire, Artaxerxes (2:1-8). As cupbearer, Nehemiah had the relationship with Artaxerxes that would enable him to take this action.

Protocol demanded that one did not make a direct request of the king. Therefore, Nehemiah put on a sad face and moped around in order to get the king to ask, "Why is your face sad, Nehemiah, since you are not sick? This can only be sadness of the heart" (2:2). The king's question was an invitation to Nehemiah to share his concern, which he did.

Nehemiah tells Artaxerxes of the news he has received from his brother and others (see the previous individual and house meetings Nehemiah had with them) of the poverty, helplessness and vulnerability of his people. Then, he makes several requests of the king. Nehemiah asks that (1) he be permitted to go to Jerusalem to assess the situation; (2) if the situation is as the people have shared it is with him, that he be authorized to organize the people to rebuild their walls; (3) that the king guarantee safe passage for Nehemiah to Jerusalem; (4) that the king be willing to have the Persian empire supply the materials (timber, rocks, etc.) at no charge for the rebuilding of the walls; and (5) that the king write personal letters to the appropriate government officials authorizing Nehemiah's requests of them. The king agrees to all of Nehemiah's requests.

This is a classic research action because the primary purpose of Nehemiah's action was to see whether or not the king would be receptive to acting through Nehemiah to address the plight of the Jews. Not only does Nehemiah's research action demonstrate that the king would be positive, but it got specific commitments out of the king that would enable Nehemiah to begin the reconstruction of Jerusalem's walls.

*The second research action* is with the queen (2:6). Nehemiah informs her of his plans, as well. This is likely done in order to guarantee that the king will not renege on any of the agreements made.

*The third research action* is with governors and officials of the Persian Empire whose cooperation is strategic to the successful implementation of Nehemiah's quest. He begins his journey to Jerusalem, but diverts from that journey to visit with the "governors of the province Beyond the River" (2:9) and with Asaph, keeper of the king's forest (2:8) in order to get their cooperation. He receives it, including the promise of all the material he needs to rebuild the walls. By their respective commitments to Nehemiah, they have become a part of his action team.

*A fourth research action* may have occurred in a meeting with Sanballat, the governor of the Persian province in which Judea and Jerusalem lay, and with Tobiah the Ammonite official,<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The term, "official", is strategic to understanding the economic implications within the book of Nehemiah. In the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), the term "official" was used to designate the economic power of a person. In the many cultures of the Middle East during the millennium in which Nehemiah lived (1000 BCE-1 AD), the political leaders of a nation were also its economic leaders, for the richest were those who ruled. How, then, could you tell whether a given document was referring to a leader's political role or his economic role? You understood according to the terms used. If the person was referred to as a "prince" (or any other governmental title), it was referring to his political role. If the person was referred to as an "official", it was noting his economic role. Thus, Sanballat was the

the most wealthy person in that province and a colleague of Sanballat's (2:10).<sup>16</sup> Here he gets a very icy reception, and he knows these people will become the ones who will most oppose him and a growing independence of the Jews.

*The final research action* occurs in Jerusalem itself after Nehemiah's arrival (2:11-16). It is a clear example of data-collection as the final research action in order to corroborate and confirm the people research done earlier. At night, Nehemiah "inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire" (2:13). His collected data supported the conclusions he had made regarding the rebuilding of the walls. Thus Nehemiah had completed his research-actions. And now, it is time to act!

In essence, we see Nehemiah doing two things in terms of research actions. First, he is *initiating action on the organizing effort* by discerning which government officials will cooperate with him and then testing that cooperation by getting agreements from them. He builds that action upon previous relationships with the king and perhaps with others that provides him with credibility. Thus, his first approach is not to confront, but rather to negotiate with them and to seek their cooperation because of his relationship with the king. This approach works with the queen, governors and Asaph, all of whom become a part of his action team. It fails with Sanballat and Tobiah.

Second, Nehemiah is *conducting a power analysis*. He is determining the relative power of each of the key government and business leaders with whom he will have to deal if the walls of Jerusalem are to be rebuilt. He is seeking to determine each person's sphere of power, his relative strength vis-à-vis the others, and his influence upon others in power. From his actions later, it is clear that Nehemiah decides that Sanballat and Tobiah, although opposed to the organizing Nehemiah will be doing, are relatively isolated and are not key players in the Persian power structure. Therefore, he can confront them with impunity if they don't cooperate (which they won't).

So how do these principles of doing the research and building the action team that was done by Nehemiah work in today's world? Well, let's see what happens with the little old ladies!

The work of the little old ladies now moved to the action team phase. The issue of this action team was community crime. It joined other action teams in ONE – an action team on redlining, another team on jobs, another on education and still another on political voice (i.e., we weren't being listened to by "the powers that be"). Each action team had one representative (usually its chairperson) who served on the ONE Leadership Team, along with one

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political leader of Canaan (including the Israelite territory within Canaan), because he is titled "governor", and Tobiah the Ammonite" was the major economic leader of Canaan because he is called an "official".

<sup>16</sup> The wording of Nehemiah 2:10 is ambiguous. It is unclear whether Sanballat and Tobiah had heard from third sources of Nehemiah's journey to Jerusalem and its purpose or whether they heard of it because of Nehemiah's direct visit to them. The latter makes the most sense, because it would have been proper protocol for Nehemiah to at least make a courtesy visit upon the governor of the province in which he would be at work on an assignment from the emperor. And such a visit would have given Nehemiah opportunity to determine whether Sanballat would be cooperative or resistant. Intriguingly, not only Sanballat's resistance, but his strong and intense opposition to this work would eventually cost him his job, with the added insult of having the emperor replace him with Nehemiah!

representative from each Protestant and Roman Catholic church, synagogue, mission organization (a settlement house and a neighborhood organization) and businesses that were dues-paying members of ONE. The Community Crime Action Team was made up of thirteen of the twenty little old ladies (seven only wanted to be involved in actions, and not in the planning) plus a representative from the house meetings. So it had close to fifty people on it.

The job of the action team was to determine the research they needed to undertake in order to wisely plan actions, to recruit from both the action team and the house meetings the appropriate people to undertake each research action, to keep the house meetings informed and motivated at their meetings, to plan the actions the team wanted to undertake to reduce crime in the community, and then to mobilize the constituency of the house meetings, the ONE member institutions and the other action teams to take those actions. Bob the organizer had the job of training the little old ladies and their action team how to do successful research actions and actions. The ladies were now well on their way to stopping crime in the community, because they had now built a sizeable committed constituency of angry people and had created a structure to organize them for action. Now they were ready for organizing and conducting the research step.

When we hear the word “research”, the first thing that comes to our minds is the gathering of data. But that is not the primary purpose of a research action. A community organization is primarily concerned about researching strategic people, not gathering data. The only data it will gather is for the purpose of corroborating the research done on people and to support their case.

The primary purpose of the research of a community organization is to determine who are the people they want to target for action and what will be the most effective actions they will want to undertake. They do this through a power analysis. The action team seeks to determine how power actually flows in the institution they are concentrating upon and who are the main players. Out of that analysis, they seek to ascertain who is the person who has the final authority for making a decision the community organization wants him/her to make, what is the likelihood that this person will be cooperative or resistant, and what is the action that needs to be taken in order to get the desired response.

How did undertaking research actions contribute to the little old ladies’ exercise of the Iron Rule, and consequently, their empowering of themselves? The Crime Action Team (with 13 of the 20 little old ladies aboard) began the research they needed to do in order to be able to determine the campaign they wanted to put together to radically reduce crime in our community. By this time, the Redlining Action Team had uncovered a significant redlining conspiracy our community was suffering, including the degree of involvement of the city and investors in its execution (their plan was to allow the community to deteriorate to the point where the city could take control over all property by eminent domain, could raze the buildings and build a mammoth upscale high rise housing and retail business complex). Of course, as fellow action teams of the same community organization, the Redlining Action Team immediately shared its findings with the Crime Action Team.

Soon after their meeting with the Redlining Action Team, one of the ladies said to me, “Now we understand why there is such a problem with crime in our community. We couldn’t figure out why crime had accelerated so quickly within just a few years – how the community seemed to go overnight from a peaceful, safe community to what it is today. Now we understand. As part of the city’s plot against us, they are reducing the amount of police protection this community is receiving. Now we understand why it takes 45 minutes for the police to answer an emergency call, even though the precinct station is just a few blocks down the street. Now we know why you can never find a cop when you need one. Now we understand why you rarely see patrol cars cruising the street. This is all part of the plot to guarantee more rapid devaluation of property!” The ladies had begun to engage in rather sophisticated social analysis!

Taking as a given the city’s abandonment of the community for fiscal profit, the Crime Action Team began a series of meetings with key government officials, bank and insurance officers and businesspeople. They were trained how to do these interviews by Bob the organizer, and they would role play over and over again until they could anticipate every possible response an official might give – and know exactly how to remain in charge of the interview and not let the official control the conversation.

Out of the dozens of visits made by the little old ladies and others on the action team, two were particularly strategic. The first was to our community’s precinct commander. They found him to be polite and respectful. But they also found him uncompromising and inflexible. Consequently, they determined that it would be a waste of time to try to negotiate with him; what it would take would be an order from the Chief of Police to get compliance on the precinct commander’s part.

Another informative meeting was one the ladies had with the city council person of the 48<sup>th</sup> Ward (which included our neighborhood). She was an independent councilwoman, belonging neither to the Republican or Regular Democratic Organization (RDO). The RDO was the true power in town, tightly controlled by the mayor. The little old ladies realized, in talking with our councilwoman, that because she was outside the RDO, she had been shut out of all the inner workings of the City Council. And because she didn’t have the limited but still real clout of the Republican Party behind her, she wouldn’t even be consulted on decisions made in “smoke-filled rooms”. Consequently, our ladies realized that the councilwoman could be of no help to us in getting better police protection

The ladies learned one other extremely strategic piece of information. In examining the nature and extent of crime in our community, the Action Team uncovered a police report that stated that the crime was not haphazard, but was organized. A crime syndicate (like the Mafia, but much less powerful) had targeted our community over a year earlier for development as a center for crime. So although there might be occasional spontaneous crime, most of the crime was part of a larger effort to bring the community under the control of this syndicate. They further discovered that the front for the syndicate was a local bookstore that traded in pornography; the gang’s headquarters was literally in the back room of the store!

It was in the light of all this research that the little old ladies and the Crime Action Team put together their strategy for stopping crime in our community. They decided that it would take

action on the part of the mayor and the Chief of Police to bring about any reversal in the prosecution of crime in our neighborhood (particularly in the light of the conspiracy, which we weren't supposed to know about). But how would we get the mayor and the Chief of Police to decide that it would be in their self-interest to change their policy? The little old ladies, guided by Bob the organizer, began to hatch a plan that would get their attention! And it was built around an action that would focus publicity on the operation of the gang!

**Nehemiah 2:17-18.** *Take Action.* An action is a public meeting between representatives of a community organization and the target that results in an exchange of power. It may be one or two or three representatives. Or it may be hundreds or even thousands of representatives. It may be a confrontive demonstration. Or it may be a quiet and intimate negotiation. But the objective of the action is to bring about an exchange of power.

What is meant by “an exchange of power”? Put simply, those holding unilateral power at the meeting have something the people exercising relational power want. And the objective is to get it! That is the exchange. It is a redistribution of power because those holding the power recognize that it is in their self-interest to allow such redistribution. Obviously, the objective of the negotiation is to make it worth the while of the power holder to share some of that power.

A community organizing mantra is the phrase, “The action is in the reaction”. What that means is that when an action is taking place, the concern of the community organization is the reaction by the holder of unilateral power. In its planning for an action, the organization constructs the action in such a way that a reaction from the target is expected. How the target responds is all-important. Will he/she accept the demand the organization places? Or will she/he reject it? The objective is to get a reaction. And it is out of that reaction that the next action of the community organization will be determined.

The positive reaction of the target brings about a clear exchange of power that brings resolution to the issue that has brought about the use of relational power by the community organization. A negative reaction of the target prevents an exchange of power, guarantees that the issue is not resolved, and increases the tension between the target and the community organization. How the organization then plans its next action is crucial. Most people who use unilateral power are used to opposition either crumbling at this point or going ballistic. If it crumbles, that ends the matter. If the organization goes ballistic, then the holder of unilateral power can portray the group as being unreasonable, ruled by their emotions and can likely bring moderate to conservative citizens behind them. Thus, they have won. But “the action is in the reaction”, and the task of the community organization is to dismiss the target with the words, “You will hear from us later”, and then in its own good time, determine what it is going to do, how and where to press the issue to the next stage.

One of the best examples of taking both internal action with the people being organized and external action against their foes is found in Nehemiah 2:17-5:13. In today's reading, we will look at Nehemiah's internal action within Israel. And in the next reading, we will examine actions the organized people take against both interior and exterior foes



***The First Action was on His People.*** According to Nehemiah 2:17-20, the cup-bearer to the Persian emperor calls a public meeting of the Jewish residents of Jerusalem. He climbs onto a platform so that all can see and hear him speak, and makes one of the most compelling speeches in Israel's history.

“Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.” I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, “Let us start building!” So they committed themselves to the common good” (Neh 2:17-18).

Virtually every sentence of this remarkable speech is packed with meaning. But the first thing we need to note is that Nehemiah gathered everyone in Israel to listen to it. No one was excluded. Noble and commoner alike, male and female alike, adult and children alike, business owners and workers alike, priest and peasant alike – all were invited to participate in this action. This is a clear signal that the rebuilding of the walls and corporate life of Israel is going to be a *people's action, not an action of the elite*. The work is not going to be done *for* the people but *by* the people, who must assume the ownership of it if it is going to succeed.

Second, note how Nehemiah opens his speech. “You see the trouble *we* are in.” He begins by identifying himself with the people. He included himself in their deepest concerns. And that inclusion wasn't lost on the crowd.

Nehemiah *publicly states the problem* in the presence of all the people. “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned” (2:17a). By publicly declaring the problem, Nehemiah is taking several strategic steps in organizing the people to act powerfully about their situation.

First, by stating the problem, he is making that problem the immediate concern with which they need to deal. Earlier, I stated that Nehemiah knew that the *primary* problem facing Israel was not their broken-down walls but their broken-down life together (1:7). Until they reclaimed for their lives the shalom community, they would never know peace and well being as a nation, no matter how tall their walls!<sup>17</sup> The vulnerability the Israelites so desperately felt, they had attributed to their broken-down walls. But that vulnerability was actually a manifestation of their deepest problem – a profound spiritual problem.

What was significant, however, is that the people didn't discern that. Only Nehemiah did. But Nehemiah didn't try to force his insight upon them. He *knew* what they were concerned about, because he had talked with so many of them. And what they were threatened by was their

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<sup>17</sup> The book of Nehemiah is divided into two parts. Chapters one through six deal with Israel's organizing to address their most immediate problem – their broken-down walls and consequent sense of vulnerability. Chapters seven through thirteen deal with Israel's organizing to address their deepest spiritual problem – their broken-down corporate life and their re-embracing of the shalom community as presented in the book of Deuteronomy. We are examining the first part of the book of Nehemiah in the commentaries on Nehemiah 1:1-6:16. We will examine the second part of Nehemiah's organizing strategy in the commentaries on Nehemiah 8:1-11:2 found in Cycle C, Epiphany 3.

broken-down walls. So, like any good organizer, Nehemiah began where the people were – organizing around their *perceived* issues, and biding his time until, through the continuing process of *action and reflection* the people would themselves come to the conclusion that their problem was a spiritual problem. And once they perceived their problem as spiritual, they would undertake solutions so radical that not even Nehemiah could have convinced them to have carried them out!

Second, by publicly articulating this problem, Nehemiah is making the rebuilding of the walls the exclusive issue with which the people should deal. By stating it before the people and getting their concurrence, he eliminated all other problems from consideration. This focused the attention of the people on addressing this single problem at this specific moment in time.

Third, by publicly articulating this problem, Nehemiah gains public ownership from the people of the problem and thus makes it possible for the people to do something about it. Most people own their problems privately. Because they have kept the problem to themselves, they think they are the only person facing this problem. Consequently, they begin blaming themselves for having the problem. When the problem is articulated publicly, and one perceives that many are having the same problem, one begins to feel support (“misery likes company”), stops blaming him/herself for the problem, and begins to act together to solve the problem.

For example, a single mother may be having trouble with her son in school. No matter what she does, her son seems to be falling further and further behind in his schoolwork. She begins to think that her son is not very bright and that she is a rotten parent. She has had private conferences with the teacher and the school counselor, both of whom suggest all sorts of things she could do to improve her son’s learning capacity (some of which are very expensive and that she can’t afford). With everything they say, the conviction is reinforced for that mother that she is a rotten parent and that her son is not very bright.

But then she visits with another parent in the community and hears that the other parent is also having trouble with her children in the same school. That parent invites her to a meeting of other parents, and in that larger meeting, she hears many parents share how poorly their children are doing, and how the school keeps suggesting courses of action that are financially unfeasible for any of the parents to implement. Suddenly the problem changes. Not all these children can be stupid. Not all these parents could be so bad. Perhaps the problem lies, not so much with these parents and children, but with the school and how it is seeking to teach these children. By publicly articulating the problem, the problem has moved from being a private problem to a public concern, and from one of self-blame to the shortfall of the educational system! That was what Nehemiah was accomplishing by publicly articulating the problem of broken-down walls!

Nehemiah then *turns the problem into an issue*. “Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace” (2:17b). At first glance, it appears that what Nehemiah is doing here is turning the problem into a solution (i.e., the problem is broken-down walls; the solution is to rebuild the walls). But that is not what he is doing at all. Rather, what he is doing is turning the problem into an issue.

A problem is a complex situation that is, because of its immensity, so amorphous that it is difficult to determine a simple plan of action to resolve that situation. Thus, the problem facing Israel (“Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned”), while appearing simple, is really quite complex. What do you need to do to reverse Jerusalem lying in ruins? Well, obviously, the walls need to be rebuilt. But so do the streets and the homes. The market square needs to be reopened and business needs to be able to be conducted there. Provision needs to be made for handling street traffic, providing drinking water to the populace, removing body waste and trash. And a palace needs to be built for the governor. The problem of rebuilding Jerusalem is so complex that it is difficult to determine a simple plan of action to resolve that situation.

But “how do you eat an elephant,” the old African proverb asks? The answer is, “One bite at a time!” The purpose of an issue is to reduce the problem to “bite-size”. It is to remove all the possible tasks that are capturing your attention, and select a single task to do. And then, it is to require a response. “Will you or won’t you undertake this action?”

This is what Nehemiah was doing when he challenged the people, “Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem”. He was, in essence, asking them, “Will you or won’t you rebuild the wall?” Forget for the time being about the streets, the houses, the public buildings, water access, and waste removal. Will you or won’t you rebuild the walls? There are only two ways to answer that challenge. Either the people will do it! Or they won’t! What are they going to do?

*The People Determine the Solution.* Up until this point, the people are essentially being organized by Nehemiah, with him, as the organizer, playing the pivotal role. Now the role begins radically changing, as the people assume the full leadership of the organizing process and Nehemiah moves into a supportive role.

“Then they said, ‘Let us start building!’ So they committed themselves to the common good” (2:18). The people decide that what they are going to do is to organize themselves to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah isn’t going to do it for them. The Persian government isn’t going to do it (the government would supply the building materials but they won’t do the actual construction – cf. 2:1-8). The people will take charge of their own situation, and solve their own problem. They will take on that issue and rebuild the walls!

How did the “little old ladies” back in Chicago undertake action to substantively address the issue of crime in their neighborhood? Well, as a result of their research actions, the little old ladies and the rest of the Crime Action Team came to the conclusions that (1) the only way to significantly reduce crime in our community was through the intentional efforts of the Chicago Police Department to reduce crime; (2) that would not happen unless it came as an express order from Chicago’s Police Chief; (3) the parent community organization, ONE, had to convincingly demonstrate its capacity, ability and willingness to act that the Chief of Police would decide that it was in his self-interest to reduce crime in our community. With the help of Bob the organizer, the ladies and the Action Team put together a campaign to accomplish the above three objectives, and to train the little old ladies and other members of the action team to implement that campaign. What that campaign was and what it accomplished will appear at the end of the commentary on Nehemiah 3:1—5:13.

**Nehemiah 3:1—5:13.** *The People Determine Their Own Strategy to Rebuild the Walls (continued).* Chapter three of Nehemiah lays out the plans for the rebuilding of the walls. It is a deceptively simple strategy.

The strategy was, in essence, to assign each extended Jewish family (usually 15 to 50 men and women related to each other who shared in the construction, cf. 3:12) the task of rebuilding a designated portion of the wall. The strategy was that each “family” would build in concert with the families to its right and left, so that the entire wall would be raised evenly over its entirety (3:1-32). This would, in turn, provide significant stability to the wall as it climbed upward.

What is particularly significant was that, whenever possible, families were assigned to build “in front of their houses” (e.g., 3:28-29). Thus, those creating the building plan intentionally used the *self-interest* of the people to accomplish the building – because, obviously, one would build his portion of the wall very securely if it were guarding access to his own home!

*The People Carry Out the Action.* The book of Nehemiah now moves to a report on the people’s implementation of their strategy (Neh 3-5). The people simply set to work, each family constructing their portion of the wall, using the materials provided by the Persian government. And the wall slowly grew upward. Thus, Nehemiah has completed his first action on the people, moving them from helplessness to beginning the task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

*The Second Action was an action on the Systems of the Province.* The book of Nehemiah tells us, “But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and the gaps were beginning to be closed, they were very angry, and all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it” (Neh 4:7-8).

The success of the Israelites in their effort to rebuild the walls creates opposition by the political systems (symbolized by Sanballat, the governor of Palestine), the economic system (symbolized by Tobiah the Ammonite “official”) and those people who were not Jews (who were obviously intimidated by the renewed energy of Israel). That opposition took three forms.

First, the political and economic systems and the people mocked the efforts of the Jews, making light of their accomplishment (4:1-5). When that didn’t work, they threatened Israel with violence (4:7-14). Finally, when that reaction failed, these opposing systems and people-groups attempted an assassination of Nehemiah (6:1-9).

It is intriguing to note how Nehemiah and the Jews responded to these three attempts by outside interests to block their rebuilding effort. When mocked, the Israelites simply chose to ignore the taunts; they didn’t take the mockery seriously and just went right on building (4:6)! When threatened with violence, however, the Israelites took that threat quite seriously! They divided the Hebrew work force in half with one group doing the construction for a period of time and the other group standing guard; then, at a prearranged time, they traded roles and the builders

became the guards while the guards became the builders (4:15-23). As they worked, the builders kept their swords with them, so that both groups were armed for battle at any time. The preparedness of the people stopped Sanballat's implementation of this plan (4:23).

The third attempt by Sanballat, Tobiah and the Gentiles to block the rebuilding effort was attempts at assassination. In this action, Nehemiah was clearly in charge. The coup leaders sought to lure Nehemiah into a trap by asking him to attend negotiating sessions with Sanballat on two separate occasions. Nehemiah simply refused to attend (6:1-13). Intriguingly, when Sanballat threatened to report Nehemiah's action to Artaxerxes (interpreting his actions as an effort to rebel against Persia), Nehemiah, in essence replied, "Go right ahead! Report me to the king. See into what trouble it will get you" (6:6-9)! Nehemiah was confident in the trust relationship he had spent years building with Artaxerxes that he need not fear any such threat.

It would be expected that the systems and people whose power would be threatened by Israel's action would oppose the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. What came as a particularly bitter pill for Nehemiah to swallow, however, was the betrayal of the wealthy and powerful Jews. But the action Nehemiah brought against those Jews is a classic example of how to effectively confront.

***The Third Action Was Against the Principalities and Powers of Israel.*** A number of the Jews working on the wall came to Nehemiah with "a great outcry!" They reported to him that a number of wealthy and powerful Jewish leaders were taking advantage of the circumstances created by the rebuilding of the walls to make significant money and gain power at the expense of the people (5:1-5).

Because the people were spending so much of their time in rebuilding the walls, they could not continue to work their fields sufficient to generate adequate income. Therefore, they had to turn to rich Jewish leaders for short-term loans. Those leaders were requiring the people to commit their fields, vineyards and houses as collateral for those loans and they were being charged exorbitant interest – both activities forbidden by the Deuteronomic law code! These leaders were now foreclosing on those loans, taking away the people's "birthright" and even taking their sons and daughters as payment – turning the sons into slaves and the daughters into prostitutes (once again, against the Law). "We are powerless", they complained to Nehemiah, "and our fields and vineyards now belong to others" (5:5).

It is instructive to note what Nehemiah does, when he learns of this injustice occurring "inside the camp". He begins by telling us, "I was very angry when I heard their outcry and their complaints. But after thinking it over . . ." (5:6), and then it describes his first action steps. Nehemiah's first reaction is to be angry. But then he thinks it over. The Hebrew actually says, "But I took counsel with myself!" He had a conversation with himself and reflected on what he should do. In other words, he changed his anger from "hot anger" into "cold anger" and calmly and calculatedly developed a plan of action. Now consider that plan of action.

First, Nehemiah met with "the nobles and the officials" (the Jewish political and economic elite) who were making profit off the financial straits of their brother and sister Jews (5:6-7). He confronted them privately about what they were doing, making it clear to them that

they were breaking the Law. The text is unclear whether he asked for a response from them at that time, but it is clear that they were “put on notice” that they were going to be held accountable for their actions.

Second, Nehemiah “called a great assembly” of all the people (5:7b-13). That assembly was a classic example of how to bring powerful leaders to accountability for their actions.

At the assembly, Nehemiah placed the economic and political leaders on trial, literally facing their accusers – the people. Presumably, he had the people tell their stories of the exploitation and oppression they and their children were experiencing from these leaders. Nehemiah then confronts the leaders, summarizing the crime of which they were accused (5:8), and then presenting the people’s demand to stop the charging of interest and to return their collateral to them (5:9-11).

The Jewish political and economic leaders, overwhelmed at such public confrontation, replied, “We will restore everything and demand nothing more from them. We will do as you say” (5:12). But Nehemiah wouldn’t accept their verbal agreement. He made them commit to a binding contract by having them take an oath before the Israelite priests and the people (5:12). He then concluded by declaring that they will be banned from Israel if they do not conform to this agreement (5:13). The assembly supported him in these demands. And the confrontation ended with the word “And the people (i.e., the political and economic leaders) did as they had promised” (5:13)!

In the light of what we have just explored about the Israelites’ (and Nehemiah’s) direct action against Canaan’s “Powers That Be”, how does that apply to the action of the “little old ladies” in their confrontation of Chicago’s police department? The ladies and the action team decided that the first part of the campaign had to be an action against the crime syndicate that would, in reality, target the Chicago Police Department. The plan they devised was extremely creative. And its execution was flawless! This is what these formerly powerless little old ladies did.

The strategy of our little old ladies was to picket the pornographic bookstore where the crime syndicate had its headquarters. So the ladies got in touch with all the television stations and newspaper reporters, informing them about an upcoming public demonstration. The action team recruited all the elderly community residents they could from the house groups of the Crime Action Team and from the remainder of ONE. Their advertising said, “Only those with white hair, blue hair or no hair should come to picket!”

Now in the United States at that time, there was a very popular and unique advertising campaign undertaken by the Burma Shave Company. The company introduced a succession of small signs along a given stretch of highway, each sign with just a few words on it – but all of the signs, considered together, conveying a message. The aim was to tantalize people driving by to keep reading all of the signs until they got the full message. Some examples were: “Don’t lose your head/ To gain a minute/ You need your head/ Your brains are in it!/ Buy Burma-Shave” and “The monkey took/ One look at Jim/ And threw the peanuts/ Back at him./ He needed Burma-Shave”.

At the same time, there was a popular song being played on the radio about “little old ladies in tennis shoes” from Evanston, Illinois, who were trying to get everyone to stop drinking whiskey (Evanston was the site of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union). Both of these American phenomena became the base for this creative action.

On the day of the action, over 300 elderly people (all associated with ONE) assembled in front of the pornographic bookstore. All of them had on tennis shoes! They produced a bunch of placards, each in the Burma Shave format. The television cameras stationed themselves at both ends of the picket line in order to catch the signs just before they made the turn. And the picketing began.

As they marched, everybody kept chanting, “This place’ got to go; this place’ got to go!” Then the little old ladies made the first turn of the picket line (where the TV cameras were). And suddenly, up came each sign. The first placard said, “We may be little old ladies”. The cameras went down to their faces; sure enough, they *were* little old ladies! The second sign declared, “We may be wearing tennis shoes!” The cameras went down to their feet, and sure enough, they *were all* wearing tennis shoes. The third: “But we don’t live in Evanston”. The fourth: “We live in the Edgewater community of Chicago.” The fifth: “And we don’t like this bookstore, because . . .”. The sixth: “It’s a pornographic bookstore”. And on and on the signs came.

Then came the *coup de grace*. Suddenly, a little old lady whom the action team had carefully selected came roaring up to the television cameras on a Harley-Davidson “hog” motorcycle. She was dressed in the tightest blue jeans, a black leather motorcycle jacket and black motorcycle cap (the most popular motion picture playing in America at the time was “The Wild Ones” about an outlaw motorcycle gang). She kept roaring around the marching protestors on her Harley-Davidson and would periodically stick her face into a television camera, ranting and raving about “these dirty old men visiting this pornographic bookstore and then trying to corrupt us lovely young ladies with their evil intentions!”

As you can imagine, the reporters and television crews just loved all of it! It was HOT copy! On the news that night, our little old lady picketers and motorcyclist were not only picked up by every Chicago television station – it was shown nationally on every network news!

As we noted earlier, “the action is in the reaction”. Well, you can imagine the reaction – not simply of the crime syndicate, but of the mayor and the Chicago police chief. Before the network news had gone off the air, the mayor had telephoned the Chief and commanded him, “Meet with those ladies and get this matter settled!” Our little old ladies had demonstrated how truly powerful they really were!

Monday morning, bright and early, the spokes lady of the Crime Action Team received a telephone call from the secretary of the Chief of Police. And in a few days, the little old ladies were sitting at a conference room at police headquarters with the Chief of Police, his senior staff and the commander of our precinct. But the ladies were not alone. They had brought with them over 200 people who were standing in the courtyard below!

The ladies presented their demands: a serious effort of the precinct to stop crime in our community, organizing a “Neighborhood Watch” program, an ongoing dialogue between ONE and the precinct including monthly crime reports to ONE, driving out the crime syndicate, and cops walking beats. The police balked at the proposal that cops should walk beats; “They haven’t walked beats in 37 years,” the commander stated. “Too bad,” the little old ladies responded. “We want them walking beats now!” The Police Chief intervened, ordered the commander to have all officers walking beats in five days, acceded to all the demands, and ended by saying to the commander, “Not only are you to produce monthly crime reports for ONE; I want to see those reports each month as well – and I will be watching your performance!”

So it was that the syndicate was driven out of Edgewater, crime plummeted overnight, a dialogue had begun between citizens and police, cops walked beats, and the little old ladies had discovered how truly powerful they actually were!

“You may be little old ladies. But you are not ‘nothing but little old ladies’. You are very powerful little old ladies. And if you want to stop crime in this neighborhood, you can!”

What I had learned from this entire organizing effort and from these little old ladies was the Iron Rule of organizing – and what ought to be the Iron Rule of all ministries: “Never do for others what they can do for themselves!” That Iron Rule was profoundly expressed in an understanding of ministry, not as helping and serving people (my question: “ladies, how can I help you?”) but as enabling people to help themselves (Bob the organizer’s question: “ladies, what’s your problem?”).

**Nehemiah 6:15-16** tells us that it took 52 days to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem – once the people put their mind to “this great work”. The reconstruction of those walls was completed by October 2, 445 BCE. But in the midst of the joy of a work well done, it is easy for us to overlook the fact that those walls had been demolished for 141 years (they were demolished in 586 BCE by the Babylonian army, according to II Kings 25:10).

For 141 years, the Jewish people had tolerated the demolition of their walls. For 141 years, they had put up with the loss of protection against marching armies, the looting and pillaging by marauding bands, the raping of their wives and daughters, the burning and demolition of their homes and public buildings, and the leveling of their Temple so that they had no place to worship God. For 141 years, they accepted the critique of the rest of the world that they were a nation of no-bodies, a people oppressed first by the Babylonians and then the Persians and even by the local tribes whom Sanballat represented, a people exploited by both those who controlled Palestine’s economy and even their own Jewish elite, a people marginalized by their religion and by their belief in an apparently ineffective God. Because their city’s walls were broken down, the Jewish people accepted the abuse of the rest of the world, making them into second-class citizens for 141 years. Yet, as Nehemiah demonstrated to them in 445 BCE, the power to radically change their situation had lain for all 141 years in their own hands! At any time during those 141 years, they could have chosen to rebuild those walls!



The question that must therefore be asked is this: why did the Jews not say, sometime during those 141 years, “We’re not going to take this anymore?” Why did they take such abuse from the tribes around them, the desert people pillaging them, the nations oppressing them? Why did they choose to remain in such bondage?

The answer is simple. They lacked a Nehemiah. They lacked a person who would ask questions, who would listen to their pain, who would learn from the people, who would build relationships with them, who would allow his heart to be broken with that pain, who would pray to God for his people, who would assess the resources at hand, who would not be afraid of stepping out into public life and confronting even an emperor, and who would gather the people and declare to them, “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.”

The Jews lacked a person sufficiently committed to the empowerment of his people that he would dedicate his life to enabling them to determine the issues of their society they would address, teach them both by relationships and by example how to act powerfully for the common good, and trust them with the responsibility to rebuild their own nation rather than to depend upon emperor, priest or business leader.

But once they found a person who both believed in and personified the Iron Rule of Power – “Never do for others what they can do for themselves” – and carried it out in his ministry with them, well then, dear student of scripture and justice, Israel was reborn!

## **JOB 31:1-40**

**Job 31:1-40** completes Job’s defense of himself. The book of Job actually consists of two works. The first is a prose tale of a man who falls victim to a sequence of terrible catastrophes, but rather than railing at God for his misfortune, he remains faithful to God (Job 1:1-2:13 and 42:7-17). The second section is a poetic work (3:1-41:34) that deals in amazing honesty with the problem of human suffering, refusing to settle for simple or pietistic answers.

That poetic work is divided into two parts. Job 3:1-31:40 contains the inadequate analysis of Job’s “friends” who try to figure out why Job should have been visited with such suffering and Job’s responses to them, which basically expose their “theories” about why people suffer as being woefully inadequate. Job 31:40 ends that apologia with the declaration, “The words of Job are ended”. That’s all Job has to say about that!

The second major portion of the poetic section is 38:1-42:6, in which God replies to Job, not so much giving explanation to Job about why he should have been the victim of such suffering as to declare that Job is dealing with matters that are beyond his capacity (and any person’s capacity) to understand. In between these two sections is a brief interruption in the text (32:1-37:24), in which an otherwise unknown character, Elihu, states his opinions why Job has suffered (biblical scholars have suggested that the Elihu passage was not part of the earliest draft of the book of Job but was added at a later date in order to present a balancing addition to the argument of Job’s three friends which otherwise they seemed to have lost).

There is perhaps no portion of Job's defense of himself as dramatic and powerful as is this final defense found in Job 31:1-40a. That defense summary consists of Job's recitation of the primary sins against which the Law speaks – lying (vv. 5-8), adultery (9-12), injustice (13-23), greed (24-25), lack of compassion (29-30), violence (31-34), idolatry (26-27, 35-37) and malice (38-40) – and his explanation that he has never committed that sin. This defense is beautifully constructed in each case in two steps – a positing of a potential sin with the words “If I have (and then the sin named)”, and then the consequences of the committal of that sin (“then let me (and the appropriate punishment”). Thus, *‘if I have raised my hand against the orphan because I saw I had supporters at the gate (i.e., I could get away with it), then let my shoulder blade fall from my shoulder, and let my arm be broken from its socket’* (31:21-22). The premise of Job's argument is that God has no justification for punishing Job and bringing such devastation down upon his house, for he has not broken the law or committed base sin. Therefore, such punishment is unwarranted.

What I find intriguing, however, are both Job's sensibilities regarding the poor and his attitude toward money. Both statements on the part of Job articulate what the Hebrew people at the time would have affirmed as being insights consistent with authentic acted-out faith in Yahweh.

Regarding the poor and powerless, Job states, “Have I been insensible to poor men's needs, or let a widow's eyes grow dim? Or taken my share of bread alone, not giving a share to the orphan? I, whom God has fostered father-like from childhood, and guided since I left my mother's womb, have I ever seen a wretch in need of clothing, or a beggar going naked, without his having cause to bless me from his heart as he felt the warmth of the fleece from my lambs? Have I raised my hand against the guiltless, presuming on my credit at the gate? If so, then let my shoulder fall from its socket, my arms be shattered at the joint. God's terror would indeed descend on me; how could I hold my ground before his majesty” (31:16-23, the Jerusalem Bible)?

Likewise, regarding money, Job states, “Have I put all my trust in gold, from finest gold sought my security? Have I every gloated over my great wealth, or the riches that my hands have won” (vss. 24-25, the Jerusalem Bible)?

Job is indicating not only positive action in regards to the poor, but the willingness not to be seduced into the protection of his money. Rather, his money is a resource given him to equip his responsible response to the conditions of the poor. Thus, Job's commitment to the poor, the powerless and the marginalized permeates his self-defense and is a clear statement of the priorities of a biblical faith.

**PSALMS 10, 11, 12, 39, 44, 49, 55, 60, 61, 69, 73, 74, 83, 113, 119:41-96, 140, 141, 144**

**Psalm 10** is the first of three psalms (Psalms 10, 11 and 12) that deal with the poor (the writer is automatically including himself among them), and the political, economic and religious systems

both internal and external to Israel which take advantage of the poor in order to enhance their own power and might.

The opening lines of Psalm 10 set the theme for these cries of despair. “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? What do you hide yourself in times of trouble? In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor – let them be caught in the schemes they have devised” (10:1-2)!

Psalm 10 particularly examines how those who lead the political, economic and religious systems of society think. So caught up in their greed and lust for power, they ignore the fact that someday they will face retribution. “In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, ‘God will not seek it out’; all their thoughts are ‘There is no God’” (vs. 4). Rather, they operate out of a sense of privilege and inviolability. “They think in their hearts, ‘We shall not be moved; throughout all generations we shall not meet adversity’” (vs. 6). Thus, they act to oppress, to exploit, and to dominate, constantly increasing their wealth, power and advantage.

But you can’t hurt a child of God, and get away with it! As the people operating the nation’s systems continue their dominance, God increasingly and inexorably moves toward their destruction. “But you do see! Indeed you note trouble and grief, that you may take it into your hands; the helpless commit themselves to you; you have been the helper of the orphan” (vs. 14). Thus, God will eventually act “to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more” (vs. 18)!

**Psalm 11** falls into the category of an imprecatory psalm that creators of lectionaries don’t want offending the tender ears of Christians assembled for worship. And that is too bad, because by rejecting it from the readers, it avoids recognition of the consequences of our actions.

Psalm 11 works with the feeling that the powerless have that life is tumbling down around them, and they with it. But in that sense of everything coming apart, the believer in Yahweh can take asylum in God’s Temple. “In the Lord I take refuge; how can you say to me, ‘Flee like a bird to the mountains.’ For look, the wicked bend the bow; they have fitted their arrow to the string to shoot in the dark at the upright in heart. If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do” (11:1-3)?

If the foundations are destroyed, what, indeed, can the righteous do? The psalmist answers that intimidating question with the most profound recognition. “The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord’s throne is in heaven. His eyes behold, his gaze examines humankind” (vs. 4). You don’t get anything past God. You can’t hurt a child of God and get away with it. You can’t use your political, economic and religious power to oppress, exploit, dominate or enrich yourselves – and not pay a horrible price for it. The Lord is in his holy temple. The Lord sees what is going on; God takes note of it and God will act to punish as well as to bless!

The psalm then moves to its conclusion. “The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked, and his soul hates the lover of violence. On the wicked he will rain coals of fire and sulfur; a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup. For the Lord is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face” (vss. 4-7).

To capture the full power of these words, end this psalm substituting the word “just” for “righteous” – “For the Lord is just; he loves just deeds; the upright shall behold his face”. This is an appropriate substitution, because the Hebrew meaning of the word translated “righteous” is not what the English word “righteous” means. The English word is defined as “acting in accord with divine or moral law”, “being morally right or justifiable”; it therefore refers to private or moral behavior. The Hebrew word, translated either as “righteousness” or “justice” (*tsedeq*) means “compensatory equality” or “compassionate mercy toward the poor”. That is, the word is always used to deal with public justice rather than with private morality. Therefore, to translate Psalm 11:7 with the English word, “righteous” is to miss what the author is seeking to communicate – that God loves justice and therefore it is the just person, not the successful person, who wins God’s respect and protection!

Thus, the Psalm tells us, God is not powerless to act. Rather, what goes around comes around, so that a price will be paid by those who act oppressively, exploitively or in a marginalizing ways toward their fellow man or woman.

**Psalm 12** is the most definitive of these three psalms in dealing with what God is going to do in the light of humanity’s injustice and unrighteousness. It suggests that those who are powerful and who exercise their capacity to dominate and take advantage of the poor, powerless and marginalized, do so in ways that are not immediately apparent. In fact, to the public, those people of power seem to be the compassionate champions of the poor. But “they utter lies to each other; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak” (12:2).

But truth will out! And God’s working of justice will out, as well! The Psalmist declares, “Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now rise up,” says the Lord; “I will place them in the safety for which they long.” And then the Psalmist continues, “The promises of the Lord are promises that are pure, silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times. You, O Lord, will protect us; you will guard us from this generation forever” (12:3-7).

**Psalm 39.** Johannes Brahms composed what is perhaps his greatest music, *A German Requiem* (*Ein deutsches Requiem*), in the saddest year of his life when his parents divorced and then his mother died. The most moving part of the entire Requiem is the third section, “*Herr, Lehre Doch Mich*” (“*Lord, make me to know mine end*”) where the baritone soloist sings these words from Psalm 39:4-7 (translated from the German).

“Lord, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days – what it is; that I may know how frail I am. Behold thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee. Verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Surely every man walketh in a vain shew: surely they are disquieted in vain; he heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them. And now, Lord, what wait I for? My hope is in thee” (Psalm 39:4-7).

Then the chorus and baritone leap into the triumphant, “But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them” (The Wisdom of Solomon 3:1, the Apocrypha).

It is reputed that, in one of the first recitals of the piece, those in the room who were elderly were in tears by the conclusion of this piece, while the young sat there restless. Brahms reached across to the youth sitting next to him, clapped him on the leg, and said, “This song – it is not for you young men!” Only those who had lived long enough to take “the measure of (their) days” could appreciate the recognition that our lifetimes “are as nothing in your sight” and that the “heaping up (of) riches” or living for anything else is nothing by futility.

This passage reminds us that life is not forever. Our days are indeed measured out, and are steadily, surely running out. As this Psalmist says, “let me know how fleeting my life is”. As we live our lives, they seem to go on forever (do you remember, as a child, how far away Christmas seemed to be?). But as one approaches their final years, they look over the accumulation of them to that point, and they seem so short! They seemed to have flown by with such rapidity.

It is in response to the reality of the shortness of life, that we have two responsibilities. The first is to evaluate our life thus far – the values upon which it has been built, the focus of its purpose and the difference it has made in other lives. As Christians, we must ask, “Have I lived my life centered in God’s will? Has my life been centered in a hope and a purpose focused on loving God and being loved by God? Has my life been acted out working for God’s love and justice wherever God has placed me in the world? Life centered in God and for God’s kingdom is what life is meant to be about. For, as the author of Psalm 39 concludes his psalm, “I am your passing guest, an alien, like all my forebears. (Therefore) hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry. Turn your (critical) gaze away from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more” (39:12-13)!

**Psalm 44** is a national lament and prayer for help. It describes Israel as being totally defeated and wasted as a nation, scorned and mocked by all the other peoples of the world. Therefore, I believe that its internal evidence indicates that this is a psalm from the period of exile because it sounds like a description of the Babylonian captivity.

Basically, the theme is that God once blessed Israel in battle, but has now thoroughly abandoned them.

“We have heard with our ears, O God, our ancestors have told us what deeds you performed in their days – in the days of old. You with your own hand drove out the nations, but Israel you planted; you afflicted the peoples, but Israel you set free” (44:1-2).

But no longer! “You made us turn back from the foe, and our enemies have gotten spoil. You have made us like sheep for slaughter, and have scattered us among the nations. You have sold your people for a trifle, demanding no high price for them. You have made us the taunt of our neighbors, the derision and scorn of those around us” (44:10-12).

What is most intriguing in this psalm is the extreme self-righteousness of its author. He cannot see that his people in any way contributed to their current downfall. Rather, in his opinion, they had been honorable and faithful in their worship of God and service of the people. And yet God had inexplicably and unjustifiably betrayed and taunted them.

“All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten you, or been false to your covenant. Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from your way. Yet you have broken us in the haunt of jackals, and covered us with deep darkness” (44:17-19).

The psalmist states that he could understand God’s punishment and apparent abandonment of Israel “if we had forgotten the name of our God, or spread out our hands (in worship) to a strange god” (vs. 20). But they haven’t! Israel is totally free of any such sin. So by what justification would God deeply punish them?

If this psalm is indeed an exilic psalm, then it certainly demonstrates that “there are none so blind as those that choose not to see”! It baffles the mind that one could be so blind to the national sin of Israel as is the self-justifying author of this psalm. It demonstrates the profound disconnect between that which can occur in people’s thinking about their Sabbath worship of God and then the way they choose to live the remainder of their week. From the psalmist’s perspective, the Israelites worshipped Yahweh on the Sabbath and kept all the ritualistic and liturgical laws. Therefore, they were being obedient to God and deserved to be protected by Him. They could not perceive that true religion is not how you worship on the Sabbath but whether, in both your personal and public life, you “do justice, love each other tenderly, and walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

So their demand to God is very straightforward, perceiving themselves as the victims. “Rise up, come to our help, O God. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love” (44:26).

But, of course, God has no intention of rescuing them!

**Psalm 49** focuses upon the accumulation of wealth as one’s primary objective in life. Two statements in that psalm seem to particularly capture the psalmist’s argument:

“When we look at the wise, they die; fool and dolt perish together and leave their wealth to others. Their graves are their homes forever, their dwelling places to all generations (though they named lands their own). Mortals cannot abide in their pomp; they are like the animals that perish. Such is the fate of the foolhardy, the end of those who are pleased with their lot” (49:10-13).

“Do not be afraid when some become rich, when the wealth of their houses increases. For when they die they will carry nothing away; their wealth will not go down after them. Though in their lifetime they count themselves happy – for you are praised when you do well for yourself – they will go to the company of their ancestors, who will never again see the light” (49:16-19).

The Psalm can really be summarized in one short statement: “you can’t take it with you!” The thrust of the psalm can’t be appreciated apart from Israel’s theory of economics. Israelite economics was based on the premise that a human actually owns nothing, because all that one possesses is a gift from God. As the “owner” of the world, God invests God’s wealth (the world’s wealth) temporarily in us so that we might be stewards or trustees of God’s wealth. And we are to steward that wealth so that poverty (both ours and the entire nation’s need) is eliminated. In fact, the supreme test of a nation’s spirituality is how well it does in so ordering its economy and its life together that “there are to be no poor among you” (Deut. 15:4).

In that light, this psalm is stating that it is foolish for people to perceive themselves as owners of a private wealth for them to use as they please. The fact is, this psalmist contends, that you can’t take it with you – that no matter how much you seek to accumulate and hoard your wealth as if it is yours, the reality is that it will someday be required of you. If you do not lose it earlier, you will certainly lose it at your death! The only land you will occupy forever is the land in which you are buried and the only property you will “own” in perpetuity will be your casket! Then comes the cynical line, repeated twice for emphasis (vss. 12, 20): “Mortals cannot abide in their pomp; they are like the animals that perish”!

“What fools these mortals be”, the Psalmist in essence is declaring, “acting like they own this wealth when, in reality, it owns them and will eventually be required of them!”

**Psalm 55** is a truly painful psalm because it deals with betrayal by a close friend. It is divided into four parts. The first part (55:1-11) gives no hint of what is to come because it simply presents the reality of treachery in one’s life – something we have all experienced. It is in the second part (55:12-15) that we discover that it was the author’s closest friend who is the perpetrator of such treachery. Part three (vss. 16-21) deals both with how the psalmist will externally respond in a godly way to this treachery, but also the deep internal pain that this act by one he trusted has generated in him. The psalm concludes with part four (vss. 22-23) that presents the “moral” of this painful experience.

Psalm 55:1-11 presents the psalmist’s lament to God. “Give ear to my prayer, O God; do not hide yourself from my supplication . . . (for) I am distraught by the noise of the enemy, because of the clamor of the wicked” (vss. 1, 3). The author is filled, he tells us, by “anguish”, “the terror of death”, “fear”, “trembling” and “horror”. Obviously, the action against him has been more than he can cope with. Consequently, he wants to escape this deep pain. “O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest; I would flee far away; I would lodge in the wilderness” (vss. 6-7). But, sadly, there is no escape from this grave betrayal done to this psalmist.

It is then that we discover the reason for the psalmist’s lament. “It is not enemies who taunt me – I could bear that! It is not adversaries who deal insolently with me – I could hide from them. But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend, with whom I kept pleasant company; we walked in the house of God with the throng” (55:12-14). One could take the rejection by enemies. But it has been a close friend of this psalmist – a person whom he

thought he could trust, a person whom he loved, a person with whom he had shared many pleasant meals, a person with whom he shared in the worship of God! How does one deal with betrayal that great? No wonder he wants to “fly far away and lodge in the wilderness”!

What, then, shall the psalmist do, faced with such severe betrayal by a close companion and friend whom he loved (vss. 16-21)? There is the external response – calling upon God to “hear me and humble them – because they do not change, and do not fear God” (vs. 19). But there is still the internal pain, and how will one deal with that profound sense of betrayal? How will God save me” and “redeem me unharmed from the battle that I wage” (vss. 16-18)?

The Psalmist concludes this psalm by answering that seemingly-unanswerable question (vss. 22-23), and does so with the most profound lines of this hymn. “Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved. For I will trust in you” (vss. 22-23). There is some pain so deep that all of the revenge and retribution in the world will not salve it. Only casting this deep burden upon God and trusting it to him is the way that you can finally find surcease for your torment! The injustice of what happened will never go away, but the pain can, as one both accepts the all-encompassing capacity of all humans (even best friends – in fact, even one’s self) to be depraved, and finds solace in the arms of God!

There is one other important nuance in this psalm that is important to note. In chapter four of this commentary, I pointed out about the Hebrew word “shalom” and its Greek equivalent, “eirene”, The multiplicity of ways *shalom* is translated into English captures the unique nuances of the Hebrew word. To capture each nuance, translators have had to select between the following English words: weal, welfare, completeness, to cause to be at peace, to make peace, peace offering, at rest, at ease, secure, safe, to finish well, to prosper, to be whole, to be perfect, to be victorious. In other words, in any given context, *shalom* can mean any of the above English words. Psalm 55 is a shining example of this observation.

In verses 18-20, the psalmist writes, “God will redeem me unharmed (*shalom*) from the battle that I wage, for many are arrayed against me. God, who is enthroned from of old, will hear, and will humble them – because they do not change and do not fear God. My companion laid hands on a friend (*shalom*), and violated a covenant with me”.

In the first use of the Hebrew word *shalom* in this passage, it is translated as “unharmed”. The second usage is more complicated. The translator has chosen to translate the line in which the second use of *shalom* is used in this way: “My companion laid hands on a friend”. It actually says in the Hebrew, “My companion acted against such as be at peace with him”. This second usage is a particularly unusual and even creative use of the word, meaning “such as be at peace”. It is intriguing to see how the translators of this passage (as found in the New Revised Standard Version) chose to work with this peculiar Hebrew text.

**Psalm 60** reminds us that God is a sovereign God, setting the course of history. We most often operate under the delusion that we can set the future and thus control our destiny, but that is a myth to which we hold. Rather, this psalm reminds us that God ultimately rules over every nation and people, as well as each individual – whether they choose to recognize, deny or ignore



that reality. For God is sovereign, and thus arranges events so that the fate of each nation is determined, no matter what the rulers do. This is magnificently described in verses 6-8 of Psalm 60:

“God has promised in his sanctuary, “With exaltation I will divide up Shechem, and portion out the Vale of Succoth. Gilead is mine, and Manasseh is mine; Ephraim is my helmet; Judah is my scepter. Moab is my washbasin; on Edom I hurl my shoe; over Philistia I shout in triumph”.”

Each geographic reference in this passage is strategic. Shechem is a city in central Palestine, belonging to the tribe of Ephraim. Succoth is in Transjordan, belonging to the tribe of Gad. Gilead, Manasseh, Ephraim and Judah were all Hebrew territories within the Hebrew empire under David. Moab, Edom and Philistia were all bordering nations to Israel’s west, east and south; all had been part of the United Monarchy – the Israelite empire. And each of them had broken away from Israel when the empire collapsed into the kingdoms of Israel and Judah (the seemingly-strange references to Moab as washbasin, Edom as the abode of Yahweh’s shoe and Philistia as the recipient of God’s battle cry are all images of Godly domination of these nations).

In other words, what the Psalmist is doing is describing the world as Israel knew it – the Israelite empire as a united and dominating entity under David and Solomon, and then the collapse of that empire into two warring small nations while conquered countries made their escape from Israel’s lost hegemony. And, in essence, God is saying, “I rule over it all, and bring the nations to the end for which I have designed them – no matter what their dedication is to accumulating wealth or power!”

**Psalm 61** deals with assurances of God’s protection. It begins with a cry for help (vss. 1, 2), but quickly moves to a recognition of God’s shelter and protection of us.

“Lead me to the rock that is higher than I; for you are my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy. Let me abide in your tent forever, find refuge under the shelter of your wings” (61:2b-4).

I love the metaphors used by the Psalmist in this psalm. God is described as a “rock” and as “a strong tower” at the center of a fortress, providing security, strength and permanence in an often shifting and volatile world. God is described in this psalm as a sheltering great bird – like an eagle or hawk – under whose wings we find refuge. He is depicted as a desert warlord in whose tent we find safety and security. God is depicted in all these metaphors as a protecting Lord surrounding the frightened victim or powerless person with strength, security, permanence and shelter. It is indeed a powerful image of God!

**Psalm 69** is a prayer for deliverance from persecution. It begins by describing the psalmist as feeling totally inundated by trouble. His description of that trouble is quite vivid.

“Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God” (69:1-3).

The Psalmist then goes on to describe that which feels like total inundation. It is enemies who are arrayed against him (that is, other Israelites) who persecute and defame him, and who are working to undermine and even destroy him. That persecution is directly related to his love and service of God.

“It is for your sake that I have borne reproach, that shame has covered my face. I have become a stranger to my kindred, an alien to my mother’s children. It is zeal for your house that has consumed me; the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me” (vss. 7-9).

One of the chief concerns of the Psalmist is that others who faithfully follow Yahweh will be tarnished by the criticism the Psalmist is receiving. He is afraid that the faithful followers of Yahweh will be de-legitimized because of the criticism he is receiving. “Do not let those who hope in you be put to shame because of me, O Lord God of hosts; do not let those who seek you be dishonored because of me, O God of Israel” (vs. 6).

The Psalmist’s prayer is that those who are seeking to defame and destroy him be punished both by society and by God. He prays that their perfidiousness and deceit be exposed and that they lose all credibility. “Add guilt to their guilt; may they have no acquittal from you. Let them be blotted out of the book of the living; let them not be enrolled among the righteous” (vss. 27-28).

Finally, the Psalmist turns from a direct address of God to address his hearers. And he expands his vision from a call for personal justification to a just response by God to the social needs of all Israel.

“I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving. This will please the Lord more than an ox or a bull with horns and hoofs. Let the oppressed see it and be glad; you who seek God, let your hearts revive. For the Lord hears the needy, and does not despise his own that are in bonds. Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and everything that moves in them” (vss. 30-34).

The Psalmist then ends the psalm by reminding both himself and his listeners of God’s true intentions. It is not simply to justify his individual saints. Rather, the task is to build this world into God’s world – to build the shalom community. No other vision, no other objective is sufficient – even the Psalmist’s woes!

“For God will save Zion and rebuild the cities of Judah; and his servants shall live there and possess it; the children of his servants shall inherit it, and those who love his name shall live in it” (vss. 35-36)!

**Psalm 73** deals with the psalmist’s attitude toward evil people. Verses 1-14 describe the life of

the wicked as luxurious and powerful, and express both the anger and the incredulity the psalmist feels in that the powerful seem to get away with it! They seem to be beautiful of body, surfeited by wealth and holding considerable power and influence. They seem most blessed, even though they are so self-serving. The writer asks, “Where’s the justice in this?”

But he goes on in verses 15-20 to reflect that things are seldom what they seem. Those who are the evil influential may look consummately powerful now. But it will not always be that way. What goes around comes around! When the Psalmist goes into the Temple and reflects in that holy place, he realizes that the wicked powerful are actually on a “slippery slope”. Once their fall begins, they will fall swiftly and decisively. And fall they eventually will! It is inevitable!

Consequently, the Psalmist rejoices in his relationship with a covenantal God, who will always be there for him and will offer both succor and support. He writes,

“When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was stupid and ignorant; I was like a brute beast toward you. Nevertheless I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honor. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (vss. 21-26)!

**Psalm 74** is a particular poignant psalm, a plea for help in a time of national humiliation. It begins:

“O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? Remember your congregation, which you acquired long ago, which you redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage. Remember Mount Zion, where you came to dwell. Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins; the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary” (74:1-3).

What the Psalmist then goes on to describe in detail is the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem – its woodwork and ornamentation hacked to pieces, its altar desecrated and it being burned to the ground. Of course, the only time that happened in the Old Testament was in the Babylonian defeat of the nation in 592-586 BCE. But that is the cause of the distress of this Psalmist – the total destruction of the temple in the face of an apparently-helpless God (vss. 4-8).

Why did God not respond? Was it that he could not? Was he helpless against the Babylonians? Or was it that he would not respond (vss. 9-11)?

Well, it was not because he could not – that he was helpless. The Psalmist reminds himself and the reader of God’s mighty power. “You divided the sea”, “you crushed Leviathan” (that is, whales), “you cut openings for springs and rivers”, “you (created) day (and) night”, “you established the stars and sun”, “you made summer and winter” (vss. 12-17). Surely such a mighty creator God could have stayed the hands of the Babylonians if he had chosen to do so. But he did not. Why?

The Psalmist has no answer to his own inquiry, because he seems to lack the capacity to perceive his own sinfulness or the disregard by his nation of the Sinai Covenant or Deuteronomic code. So all he can do is plead to God to take action against the Babylonian invaders (vss. 18-23).

“Rise up, O God, plead your cause; remember how the impious scoff at you all day long. Do not forget the clamor of your foes, the uproar of your adversaries that goes up continually” (vss. 22-23).

This is a tragic psalm. And it is tragic because it exhibits the inability of the psalmist to do the kind of social analysis necessary to clearly identify the substantive issue and seek to correct it. There is no one so blind as those who will choose not to see! As long as the Psalmist perceives the problem to be the invaders, then he will never discern that God called in the invaders in order to bring Israel to judgment and accountability for their misuse of the covenant.

The invasion is not a sign of God’s weakness – his inability to stop Babylonia. It is a sign of his strength – that he will loose a pagan and unbelieving nation upon his people in order to bring judgment. So it is that the Psalmist refuses to recognize that it is his and his people’s disobedience to the covenant and refusal to build the shalom community that has caused judgment to come upon the nation. Rather, he conveniently blames God, and does not repent – nor does the leadership of his nation repent. And thus, Babylonian captivity becomes inevitable!

**Psalm 83** is a prayer of judgment on Israel’s foes. It begins by asking God to act towards Israel’s enemies – and they are named: Edom, Ishmael, Moab, Gabal, Ammon, Amalek, Philistia, Tyre, Assyria. That collection of names tells you when this psalm was written – sometime between the reign of Ahab and the fall of the northern kingdom to Assyria – sometime between 850 and 722 BCE.

In many ways, this psalm is like any other imprecatory psalm.<sup>18</sup> It prays for evil to fall upon Israel’s enemies. “Do to them as you did to Midian . . . who became dung for the ground. Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb, all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna, who said ‘Let us take the pastures of God for our own possession.’ Make them like whirling dust, like chaff before the wind. As fire consumes the forest, so pursue them with your tempest and terrify them with your hurricane” (vss. 9-15).

But then a striking “conversion” occurs in Psalm 83. That shift appears in the psalm near its close that changes the entire timbre of that psalm. “Fill (the enemies) faces with shame, so that they may seek your name, O Lord. Let them be put to shame and dismayed forever; let them

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<sup>18</sup> Imprecatory psalms were a specific species of hymns in both Israelite and pagan cultures which prayed not only for the obliteration of the enemy but for their thorough, painful and even elaborate destruction (e.g., Psalm 7, 35, 58, 59, 69, 109, 137, 140). The language of prayer is used as a vehicle of people’s liberation. An imprecatory psalm revels in the suffering of the enemy (e.g., “break the teeth in their mouths”, “dash their babies against the wall”, “may they fall into their own nets”, etc.).

perish in disgrace. Let them know that you alone, whose name is the Lord, are the Most High over all the earth” (83:16-18).

Except for the one line, “let them perish in disgrace”, this Psalm shifts from an imprecatory focus, crying for the utter defeat and destruction of Israel’s enemies. Instead, this psalm prays for their conversion! The desire of the psalmist is that they will see the evil of their ways and repent! He doesn’t want them dead. He wants them won over to Yahweh. He wants them “to seek your name, O Lord.” *That* is a significant shift indeed!

**Psalm 113** stresses that God is the God of the needy. He is presented as the eternal God in his love of justice and mercy, “from this time on and forevermore, from the rising of the sun to its setting” (113:2b-3a).

What God does for the poor is particularly noteworthy. “He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people” (vss. 7-8).

What is remarkable about this passage is that it states that God’s care of the poor is not reserved for their rescue. Rather, it is directed toward their empowerment! God is going to make it possible for the poor to “sit with princes, with the princes of his people”. In other words, the poor will build sufficient power that they will be able to take their place in the political process, contributing to the decisions the nation makes and enabling their voice to be heard and taken seriously by those in power!

It is indeed a most remarkable statement.

**Psalm 119:41-96** continues the acrostic on the Jewish Torah. This selection includes stanzas on the Hebrew letters “vav” (W) (vss. 41-48), “zayin” (Z) (vss. 49-56), “khet” (H) (vss. 57-64), “tet” (T) (vss. 65-72), “yod” (Y) (vss. 73-80), “kaf” (K) (vss. 81-88) and “lamed” (L) (vss. 89-96). Let’s now look at each of these stanzas.

**“Vav” (W) vss. 41-48:** This stanza makes two very strategic points in understanding how Torah (the Law) strengthens the capacity of the people to hold the nation’s political, economic and religious structures accountable to God’s calling. It does this by presenting two parallel themes. First, Torah is the way that God’s love is demonstrated and acted out within the nation. Thus, the Psalmist writes, “Let your steadfast love come to me, O Lord (for) I find my delight in your commandments, because I love them” (vss. 41-47). Second, obedience to the Torah is not a constraint upon society, but rather grants liberty to it. Thus, the Psalmist states, “I shall walk at liberty, for I have sought your precepts” (vs. 45). In other words, the Psalmist’s argument is that the Law doesn’t cramp or constrain one’s freedom to act in society. In reality, it does the exact opposite, for it provides a structure for that society which, in turn, provides the primary guidelines for the ways that the political, economic and religious systems of that society are to function if liberty is to be maintained. The ultimate result of embracing Torah is that it will enable the nation to operate a just politics, an economy of the stewardship of our wealth so that

poverty is eliminated, and the centering of the society in a love of God and of each other. Thus, because of its very nature, Torah will provide the means when any person can “also speak of (God’s) decrees before kings, and shall not be put to shame” (vs. 46). It is obedience to Torah that will guarantee to the society that embraces it authentic freedom, equality and justice for each of its citizens.

**“Zayin” (Z) verses 49-56:** “Vav” gives us society as God intended it to be. But that is not the way that society most often is. What does Torah do for us when society is anything but just, equitable and relational? “Zayin” tells us that even when we suffer at the hands of those powerful people who would seek to be dominating, greedy and unilateral, reciting and staying in touch with Torah will keep us faithful. One of the ways that this can occur is that “your statutes have been my songs wherever I make my home” (vs. 54). Luther once said that those who sing pray twice. Thus, no matter what happens to the faithful follower of Torah or where he may find himself (even in prison), the songs of Zion can come with him and the very singing of those songs both reminds us of Torah and brings us hope. That is the way to remain faithful to Torah when all of life tumbles in upon us.

**“Khet” (H) verses 57-64:** So, no matter what is the condition in which the faithful Torah-keeper finds himself – whether in a society that acts justly or a society that is centered on greed and the accumulation of power – one can be sustained and encouraged by the Law. “At midnight I rise to praise you, because of your righteous ordinances”. And why can one do this – even in an evil and self-serving world? It is because “the earth, O Lord, is full of your steadfast love”.

**“Tet” (T) vss. 65-72:** When society acts corruptly, it is crucial that the keeper of Torah remain disciplined and centered on the Law. To do this, God often acts in ways to humble and to discipline us, much as physical exercise makes us more able to face the stresses of life (vss. 67, 71). Thus, illness, accusation by enemies or even business reversals can all be used by God to center us more firmly upon the Law and to make us disciplined.

**“Yod” (Y) vss. 73-80:** When one lives in a society that no longer respects Torah but is rather committed to building its own power, wealth and control, one remains focused on the Torah’s vision of “the world as it should be” by remembering that God is our creator. “Your hands have made and fashioned me”, and therefore, God is the creator of the world – no matter how humanity has misused it! Our capacity to be sustained by Torah in the midst of a world gone awry, therefore, is our God-given ability to meditate. “Let the arrogant be put to shame; as for me, I will meditate on your precepts” (vs. 78). It is in pouring over Torah, in both studying and reflecting upon it, and to ponder it that one is sustained in a society that is tumbling in upon itself!

**“Kaf” (K) vss. 81-88:** Despite all the reassurances that appear above, however, this Psalmist still feels himself under attack both by physical and spiritual foes. So he laments and calls for God’s help. “When will you comfort me” he asks (vs. 82)?

The author uses a particularly pictorial image to describe his dismay. “I have become like a wineskin in the smoke”, he writes (vs. 83). A wineskin that has become old and dry, and has been for far too long exposed both to the sun and to the smoke of the camp fire becomes

darkened, dried-out and lifeless-looking. So is he, this psalmist suggests! He has become shriveled up by his misuse by both God and society. What is God going to do about it? The psalmist suggests what God should do: “In your steadfast love spare my life, so that I may keep the decrees of your mouth” (vs. 88)!

“**Lamed**” (**L**) *vss. 89-96* is the stanza that concludes this section of Psalm 119 that analyzed Israel both as a nation under the Torah and a nation substituting for the Torah a public life of greed, control and domination, as well as the impact that this disregard of the Torah has had upon the people of Israel. Now, in “Lamed”, the author concludes this perceptive social analysis. No matter the direction the nation takes, no matter the faithfulness or faithlessness of God’s people, the Psalmist ends this profound analysis with an acknowledgement both of God’s supreme authority and of God’s protection of those who remain faithful to him.

“The Lord exists forever; your word is firmly fixed in heaven. Your faithfulness endures to all generations. You have established the earth, and it stands fast. By your appointment they stand today, for all things are your servants. If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my misery. I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life. I am yours; save me, for I have sought your precepts. The wicked lie in wait to destroy me, but I consider your decrees. I have seen a limit to all perfection, but your commandment is exceedingly broad” (vss. 89-96)!

And that is the end of the matter!

**Psalm 140** is another imprecatory psalm. The psalmist rails against “evildoers” and the “violent” (vs. 1), the “wicked who have planned my downfall” (vs. 4), the “arrogant” who “have hidden a trap for me” (vs. 5), the “slanderers” (vs. 11). Obviously, these are all people who have opposed and sought to undermine the work and reputation of the psalmist or some other political or religious leader.

The psalmist prays that they will get their just reward. He writes, “Those who surround me lift up their heads; let the mischief of their lips overwhelm them! Let burning coals fall on them! Let them be flung into pits, no more to rise! Do not let the slanderer be established in the land; let evil speedily hunt down the violent” (vss. 9-11)!

As the psalm approaches its close, however, it moves away from its attack upon the enemy, and instead demonstrates that the psalmist is well aware that God’s principal concern is for the poor and needy. Therefore, the righteous need to direct themselves, not to reaction to the enemy but to the worship of God and the service of humanity. He ends, “I know that the Lord maintains the cause of the needy, and executes justice for the poor. Surely the righteous shall give thanks to your name, the upright shall live in your presence” (140:12-13).

**Psalm 141** is both a cry for help to Yahweh and a distancing of one’s self from the “wicked”. In essence, the psalmist is arguing that he ought to receive special attention and blessing by God

because he has ostracized the wicked. Even with that imprecatory theme, however, the opening is beautiful.

“I call upon you, O Lord; come quickly to me. Give ear to my voice when I call to you. Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice” (141:1-2).

**Psalm 144** is a psalm for national deliverance and security. It is intriguing that the psalm paints a picture of what it means to live in shalom:

“May our sons in their youth be like plants full grown, and our daughters like corner pillars, cut for the building of a palace. May our barns be filled with produce of every kind; may our sheep increase by thousands, by tens of thousands in our fields, and may our cattle be heavy with young. May there be no breach in the walls, no exile, and no cry of distress in our streets. Happy are the people to whom such blessings fall; happy are the people whose God is the Lord” (144:12-15)!

### **ISAIAH 36:1—37:38**

**Isaiah 36:1-37:38.** Isaiah the prophet came out of his self-imposed exile after the death of King Ahaz, who had chosen for Judah to accept subordination to and becoming a vassal state of the Assyrian Empire rather than to trust in God for Judah’s deliverance. In making this choice, Ahaz had rejected the prophetic advice of Isaiah to trust in Yahweh for the deliverance of the nation. Instead, he had chosen to trust in the power of Assyria and thus compromise with them.

Upon Ahaz’ death, however, Isaiah came out of exile to speak to Israel’s new king. Hezekiah was now on Judah’s throne, and Isaiah soon caught his ear. Hezekiah, inspired by the desire to be “God’s man”, began a reformation in Judah’s life which returned the country to obedience to their covenants with Yahweh, eliminated syncretism (worship of Assyria’s gods and of the Canaanite gods as well as of Yahweh), and guaranteed social justice for all.

Hezekiah began his reformation by ridding the Temple of the Assyrian gods. He stopped all prayers for the Assyrian emperor and all worship of their gods. Under Isaiah’s direction, Hezekiah reinstated pure Yahweh worship. For the first time in nearly a decade, the Passover Feast was once again celebrated throughout Judah, and the people were reminded of how Yahweh had delivered them from the bondage of another tyrant. Hezekiah also sought social reform by standardizing weights and measures, thus causing a more fair and equitable distribution of wealth.

Finally, when Sargon II died in 705 BCE, Hezekiah refused to pay tribute to Assyria. In the chaos which always followed the death of an Assyrian emperor, Hezekiah rebelled against his conquerors. His army moved north into Assyrian territory, taking land which once belonged to his forefather, David.



Sennacherib, the new Assyrian emperor, soon came roaring down upon little Judah. He defeated Hezekiah in battle and sent the remains of Judah's army rushing to Jerusalem. What happened next is unclear. Assyrian records suggest that Sennacherib stopped the war because of rebellion that occurred in Assyria and returned to Ninevah to put down that unrest. Then, once he had secured Assyria, he returned to Judah to continue its conquest and elimination.

At any rate, Sennacherib eventually sought to complete the war against Hezekiah. He took Judah's main fortress, Lachish, and pushed on to Jerusalem. There one of the most significant events in Judah's history took place – an event so significant that it is recorded in three different places within scripture (II Kings 18:13-19:37, II Chronicles 32:1-23 and Isaiah 36:1-37:38).

Hezekiah stared in horror at the unbelievable sight before him. Peering over the battlements of the city of Jerusalem, the king saw the giant Assyrian army which had surrounded the city the night before. It numbered into the hundreds of thousands, while garrisoned behind the walls of Jerusalem stood only a handful of men – the remnants of Judah's army. Suddenly from the Assyrian army stepped a lone man who strode to the walls of Jerusalem. It was the Rabshakeh, the commanding general of Sennacherib's army.

The Rabshakeh flung down words of challenge to Yahweh. Speaking to the people of Judah, the general said, "Do not let Hezekiah make you rely on the Lord by saying, The Lord will surely deliver you; this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. . . . Has any of the gods of the nations saved their land out of the land of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of these countries have saved their countries out of my hand, that the Lord should save Jerusalem out of my hand?" (Isaiah 36:15, 18b-20)? With these words, the Rabshakeh presented a scroll demanding Hezekiah's unconditional surrender.

Alone, in the temple of God, Hezekiah read the scroll demanding his surrender. With a cry of desperation, he spread the scroll open before the throne of God, lay upon the ground, and prayed. As he prayed, the prophet Isaiah came to Hezekiah and spoke God's word to him.

"Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Because you have prayed to me concerning King Sennacherib king of Assyria, this is the word that the Lord has spoken concerning him. . . . He shall not come into this city, shoot an arrow there, come before it with a shield, or cast up a siege ramp against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return; he shall not come into this city, says the Lord. For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David" (Isaiah 37:21, 33-35).

Almost twenty-five years after speaking God's word to King Ahaz, Isaiah gave the same advice to Hezekiah: take heed, be quiet, do not fear – Yahweh will deliver. Unlike Ahaz, Hezekiah chose to believe God rather than men. The king went to his palace, ate his dinner, and went to bed, firmly believing that God would deliver him. Facing Judah's worst crisis, the king trusted God to rescue his people.

And Yahweh did rescue them! The Bible states, “Then the angel of Yahweh set out and struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies. Then Sennacherib king of Assyria left, went home, and lived at Ninevah” (Isaiah 37:36-37).

Next to the rescue of Israel at the Reed Sea, this event is considered God’s greatest act of deliverance. It was a miracle, for God had acted precisely in that time and place to deliver Judah from certain destruction. What happened was clear-cut proof that Yahweh reigned supreme in the universe and could rescue his people from the most impossible of situations.

The nation was saved because of Hezekiah’s trust in God. Hezekiah took Yahweh at his word. He trusted in God to deliver his people, and God did deliver. Because of Hezekiah’s previous faithfulness in bringing religious, social and political reform, and because of his trust in God rather than in human machinations, Judah was rescued.

This story – the second most important rescue story of the Jewish nation – presents a clear correlation between the responsible actions of political, economic and spiritual justice and God’s intervention in our destiny. Ahaz would not have been so rescued as was Hezekiah! Hezekiah had sought to be a responsible king, according to the guidelines for Israelite kingship as laid out in Deuteronomy 17:14-20. He was willing to be Yahweh’s vice-regent, living frugally and not ostentatiously, not exploiting his people or using them to build his own power and wealth, working for their economic good and to do all this in the light of God’s call to him to practice a politics of justice. Most of all, Hezekiah had been willing to heed Isaiah’s advice, “In returning (to reliance upon God rather than depending on foreign alliances) and rest (centering in the constancy of God’s dependability) you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength” (Isa. 30:15). Thus, Hezekiah had combined both a commitment to working to build a free and just nation, but doing so in a quiet dependence upon God and God’s utter trustworthiness. And God would honor such a commitment – and did so, by miraculously rescuing Hezekiah and all Judah from almost certain annihilation by Assyria.

Intriguingly, history attests this event! Sennacherib, who was an immensely boastful man, wrote of this event, “As for Hezekiah, the Jew . . . like a caged bird, I shut (him) up in Jerusalem, his royal city”.<sup>19</sup> Sennacherib always described in detail the capture of the royal city of each king and that king’s ultimate deposition. But of Hezekiah, Sennacherib had only the above to say. Judah’s king might have been shut up like a caged bird, but it was as a very safe bird! For Sennacherib’s own words tell us that the Assyrian emperor had not taken Jerusalem!

What actually happened? No one knows. An Egyptian record states that the Assyrian army was invaded that night by swarms of rats, and a considerably later Israelite source suggests the Assyrian camp was struck by bubonic plague. This incident emphasizes once more than the Jews did not interpret a miracle as an unexplainable, supernatural event, but rather as a God-controlled event, used by God to advance God’s work in the world.

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<sup>19</sup> Sennacherib, as quoted by Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia II*, paragraph 240, published 1926-27; also see Jack Finegan, *Light From the Ancient Past* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 177.

## **JEREMIAH 7:1-34; 38:17-23**

**Jeremiah 7:1-34.** To build the shalom community, God intends religious systems to draw humanity both to God's self and to one another. The task of religion is to build the values of a society around the relationality of life. But to what purpose did the religious systems of Israel and of the world actually give themselves that caused them to turn their back on God's vision and to go awry? The prophet Jeremiah presents one of the most perceptive analyses of what went religiously wrong. This is what he wrote:

“The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord” (Jer. 7:1-4).

This, of course, is the beginning of the famed Temple Speech of Jeremiah – perhaps the best known portion of his book of prophecies. Both the rulers and the people of Israel have adopted the exploitive and oppressive actions of the nations around them. Out of their steadily increasing greed and lust for power, they live as they so choose. They steal, murder, commit adultery, enter into illegal contracts in order to heighten their profit, and even worship other gods (7:9-10). Then they come to the Jerusalem Temple with the words, “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord” (7:4). By going through the rituals, sacrifices and liturgies of Temple worship, they think they assuage their guilt and keep God happy with them. But God is not amused! And so through Jeremiah he calls them to do three things: to repent of their sin, to give up their exploitive and oppressive activities, and begin to do justice (7:5-7). Will they respond? Will they convert? Will they once again embrace an authentic relationship with God and with each other, so that they become again the shalom community?

What is happening here is the end result of an economics of greed that leads to the exploitation of the poor and of a politics of power that leads to the oppression of the powerless. In order to build their respective powers, the political and economic systems will collude with each other to seduce the religious system to use the trust they have built with the people to control the people's responses. The objective of the political and economic systems is to get conformity (and even, hopefully, agreement) from the people. But to do that, they need the support of the system that shapes the values of the people and in whom the people most trust – the religious system. So the religious system uses its power of trust to gain control over the minds and hearts of the people, convincing them that participating in the greed of the economic systems and the unilateral power of the political system will lead to the enrichment of their lives, not their exploitation and oppression. Thus, it is the religious system that seduces the people.

So what will happen to Israel? In his Temple sermon, Jeremiah shares the instructions he received from God. “As for you, Jeremiah, do not pray for this people, do not raise a cry or prayer on their behalf, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you. Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem” (7:16-17)? What the

people are doing is imitating the political leaders of the nation, the economic powers, the priests and prophets of the religious establishment (7:18-19). The people are now following their leaders. They are embracing the life style of greed, lust for power and control so that they are joining with their political, economic and religious leaders in becoming the exploiters of their nation's poor, the oppressors of the powerless, the controllers of society.

The end result of a people who have so rejected *shalom* for their lives and embraced the greed, power and domination of their leaders and of the heathen nations is that they must be destroyed by God. Thus God says to Jeremiah,

“The days are coming, says the Lord, when it will no more be called Topheth but the valley of Slaughter; for they will bury in Topheth until there is no more room. The corpses of this people will be food for the birds of the air, and for the animals of the earth. And I will bring to an end the sound of mirth and gladness, the voice of the bride and bridegroom in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem; for the land shall become a waste” (Jer. 7:32-34).

What this passage from Jeremiah's Temple Sermon is saying is clear enough – that the day will come when the greed, lust for power and the need to dominate will become so great on the part of both the powerful and the people that their actions will result in the mass slaughter of the people. The references, however, to both Topheth and the Valley of Slaughter are even more sobering.

Topheth was a “high place” of pagan origin, in which child sacrifice had been practiced. II Kings 23:10 tells us that the pagan high place of Topheth had been coopted by the king of Judea, Manasseh for the sacrifice of children as a practice of Yahweh worship (Micah 6:7). This horrendous practice had later been stamped out by King Josiah. But by the time that Jeremiah 7:32-34 had been written (after the death of Josiah), that practice had been restored as authentic Yahweh worship, so that the Hebrew religion now conformed to pagan practices that supported the actions of prince, plutocrat and the people as they sought for political, economic or spiritual dominance over each other.

So it was that Jeremiah used the illustration of Topheth to declare, “You haven't seen anything yet”! If Topheth would be used for the mass sacrifice of children as a part of Yahweh worship, so it would be that it would become the site in which the mass slaughtering of the Jewish people would become so great that its valley would be filled to the brim with their bones, and it would come to be known as “the Valley of Slaughter”. And this would be so because Israel would abandon a justice-seeking relational faith and substitute for it a religion that would embrace for the Jewish nation the standards of the pagan nations -- standards of political oppression, economic greed and a religion of domination and control.

And that is exactly what happened! The nation that abandoned its *shalom* community was abandoned by God. The nation that was built on the vision of a people in love with God and each other, and thereby building a politics of justice and an economics of equality had become the nation of economic exploitation, political oppression and religious domination. And the people would not repent. So God's only choice was to destroy them and begin all over again with a remnant. And when that, too, failed then God chose only One who would build a new

people of God that would seek to become a people of Godly power working for the transformation of the world.

**Jeremiah 38:17-23** is a most sobering story about the final encounter between Jeremiah the prophet and Zedekiah, the last king of Judah. The story is premised on the reality that both men stand in extreme danger – Jeremiah in danger from both the king and the king’s court, and Zedekiah in danger from the besieging army of the Babylonian Empire. How they respectively respond to the danger each faces is crucial both to their future and the future of the people of God.

We need to place this scripture into its historical context. In 605 BCE, the Babylonians defeated the Egyptians at the Battle of Carchemish. This loss signaled the end of Egyptian influence over Palestine, and by 605 Judah had transferred its allegiance to the emperor of Babylonia, Nebuchadnezzar. It was becoming apparent that the days of Judah’s existence as an autonomous nation were limited.

Yet Judah could not accept its subservient role toward Babylonia. It rebelled in 598, despite Jeremiah’s strict warning that the rebellion would fail. The nation was defeated by Babylonia but was permitted to continue to exist. The king of Judah, Jehoiakim, was removed from the throne and was replaced by the heir-apparent, Jehoiachin. Judah’s leadership was taken as slaves to Babylonia, but this did not stop Judah’s inclination to revolt. An abortive rebellion failed in 594-593; again, Jeremiah had opposed it.

In Jeremiah’s eyes, rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar was a sign of Judah’s refusal to follow Yahweh. God had selected Nebuchadnezzar to conquer the world for a period of time (Jeremiah 25:8-12), and as a matter of practical politics, Judah was not to resist. Judah was by now a small and relatively defenseless client state and Babylonia was the most powerful nation on earth. To revolt against them was sheer folly, would prove itself fatal and result in the destruction of what little remained of Judah’s national life.

The Israelites, in Jeremiah’s view, had consistently refused to follow Yahweh’s covenant and God had now rejected them. There was no longer any possibility for repentance; the nation could no longer turn back, for they had now passed the point of no return. Israel had wandered too far from God’s covenant. It was going to be destroyed.

Such preaching by Jeremiah was, of course, unpopular. He was arrested, accused of treason, and cast into prison. But he did not waver in his cries of despair against Judah.

In 587 BCE, King Jehoiachin decided to revolt against Nebuchadnezzar. He had seen his predecessor, Jehoiakim, lose his throne during the unsuccessful revolt in 598. He himself had fostered the abortive revolt in 593. Now, he decided to try again!

Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army raced to Judah to put down the abortive rebellion. The court of Jehoiachin, realizing that the king had made a horrible mistake of

judgment, removed him from the throne and placed the next Davidic heir-apparent on the throne in hopes that this would assuage the anger of Nebuchadnezzar. This new king was Zedekiah.

But the action of the Israelite nobles was too little, too late. Nebuchadnezzar decided that only the elimination of the Davidic dynasty would quench the incessant rebellious spirit of the Jews. His army soon lay siege to Jerusalem. During this long and bitter siege of the city, one ray of hope appeared. Jeremiah the prophet purchased a field from a member of his family. The purchase of the field near Anathoth was to remind the Israelites that even though Jerusalem would be destroyed and its people carried into slavery, God's work was not yet done and God would restore the nation (Jer. 32:1-44).

As the city lay in siege to the giant Babylonian army, Jeremiah publically repeated the word of the Lord to Zedekiah, calling on Zedekiah to surrender to Nebuchadnezzar. This resulted only in Jeremiah being imprisoned, thrown into a cistern and otherwise persecuted. Zedekiah remained publicly firm in resisting Nebuchadnezzar, but he was beginning to have self-doubts. So he had Jeremiah brought to him, so that he might privately consult with him. And that is where the scripture for today – Jeremiah 38:14-28 begins.

King Zedekiah asks Jeremiah for his advice; what does God say the king ought to do? "If I tell you the truth", Jeremiah replies, "you will put me to death." Zedekiah gives his word, "As the Lord lives, who gave us our lives, I will not put you to death or hand you over to these men who seek your life" (vss. 15-16). Therefore, Jeremiah tells Zedekiah the truth that the king does not want to hear.

"Thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the God of Israel: If you will only surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then your life shall be spared, and this city shall not be burned with fire, and you and your house shall live. But if you do not surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then this city shall be handed over to them, and they shall burn it with fire, and you yourself shall not escape from their hand" (vss. 17-18).

On hearing the sworn testimony of Jeremiah, King Zedekiah knows that he has heard truth. But now he is in a dilemma. He can protect Jeremiah from harm. But he cannot protect himself, his family and the nation from annihilation. He knows he needs to surrender to Babylon; this will at least preserve him, his family and Jerusalem even under the ignominy of defeat. But he can no longer choose that direction. He has gone too far; he has made too many commitments and he has set a course for the nation that it cannot reverse. He has no choice but to face the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prediction of what will happen. He dismisses Jeremiah, guaranteeing his safety. He instructs Jeremiah, "Do not let anyone else know of this conversation." Then, with resignation, he waits for the end to come. And the end does come!

This scripture passage presents the inevitable consequences of one's actions. It is in the nature of political (the king and nobles), economic (the officials and business leaders) and religious (the priests) systems to seek to accrue power, wealth and control respectively in order to dominate a society for their own ends. In one sense, it is an intentional action on their parts. But if such action continues for an extended period, the reality of option slowly declines until it disappears altogether. Those occupying the systems of power they have created to give them

power eventually become controlled by those very systems, so that the people occupying those positions can no longer reverse the course of those systems. Thus, a president gets elected on a campaign issue of reducing military incursions into other nations, and then discovers that so much of the economic and political welfare of his nation is so wrapped up in such incursions that he has no choice but to continue that incursionary policy. The systems and structures that you seek to possess (and, perhaps, change) will eventually possess you! That was the situation in which Zedekiah found himself. There was no way to reverse Judah's foreign policy of revolt. Therefore, his end was assured. Thus it is that systems that do not reform eventually cease the capacity to reform, and thus their doom is assured!

Well, all that Jeremiah predicted would happen did happen. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian army. King Zedekiah was executed and the Davidic kingship of Judah obliterated. The nation was totally destroyed by Babylonia. The Temple, the city of Jerusalem and every town in Judah was burned to the ground. The political, economic and religious leaders of the Israelite nation – anyone who could foster rebellion – were taken as slaves to Babylonia. The devastation was so complete that the nation would not recover economically for two hundred years. It was all over; Judah had been destroyed! And thus the word of God, spoken by Jeremiah, had come true!

### **EZEKIEL 10:3—11:34; 16:1-63; 22:1-31**

**Ezekiel 10:3-11:34.** When we think of the book of Ezekiel, we think of the prophecy of the dry bones. But to think of the book of Ezekiel this way is to ignore its real power as a prophecy. The book of Ezekiel is probably the Bible's most sophisticated analysis of the political, economic and religious systems of Israel, how they departed from their God-given values, and the inevitable consequences of that departure. The consequences of their succumbing to the temptations of the exercise of unilateral power, greed, control and dominance is nowhere more graphically stated in the Bible than in Ezekiel 10:3-11:34.

Before the Babylonian captivity, there was a symbol of God's presence over Israel that was associated with its Temple. Over the Temple, and over the tabernacle before the temple was built, there was a mysterious glow of light. This phenomenon is referred to quite often in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Exodus 40:34-35; Leviticus 16:2; Numbers 9:15; I Kings 8:10; II Chronicles 5:13 and 7:2; Isaiah 6:4; Haggai 2:7-9, as well as Ezekiel 10-11). We do not know what it was, but the Israelites referred to it as the "shekinah" ("that which dwells"). The Hebrew Bible makes it very clear that this glow or "luminous cloud" was the manifestation that Yahweh was present in the temple and among the Hebrew people.

What is significant about Ezekiel 10:3-11:34, is that it explains what happened to that Shekinah. The prophet writes, "Now the cherubim (angelic creatures) were standing on the south side of the (temple) when the man went in; and a cloud filled the inner court. Then the glory of the Lord rose up from the cherub to the threshold of the house; the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was full of the brightness of the glory of the Lord. . . . Then *the glory of the Lord went out from the threshold of the house and stopped above the cherubim.* The cherubim lifted up their wings and rose up from the earth in my sight as they went out. . . . They

stopped in the entrance of the east gate of the house of the Lord; and the glory of the God of Israel was above them. . . . *And the glory of the Lord ascended from the middle of the city, and stopped on the mountains east of the city*” (Ezekiel 10:3-4, 18-19; 11:23, italics mine).

This is a terrifying commentary by Ezekiel. In this passage, the prophet tells the reader that the glory of God – the Shekinah – has departed. It rose off of the Temple, then lifted off the city, and finally went out to “the mountains east of the city” where it rested and waited. The Shekinah had departed from the temple, from Jerusalem and from Israel. On the mountains east of the city it settled down and waited for Israel to collapse. God had lifted His protective presence from Israel, and the nation and its people were now on their own. The inevitable result would be Israel’s destruction! This is the inevitable result of any nation that gives its self over to the worship of its power, preoccupation with the building of its wealth, and its attempt to dominate all the nations around it!

**Ezekiel 16:1-63** is both a well-known and a complex chapter. In it, Judah is likened to the bride of Yahweh. It tells how she was born the illegitimate daughter of Amorites and Hittites, abandoned and rejected as a child, and grew to womanhood under Yahweh’s protective eye. He falls in love with her – a child of the fields – marries her and raises her to the status of a queen. He bestows on her wealth and privilege, and she becomes the envy of other nations.

But then something tragic happens. Her sexual drive becomes so overwhelming that she cannot control it. She rejects Yahweh as her Lord, and gives herself sexually to any who will have her. She becomes, in particular, a whore of the Philistines, then the Egyptians, then the Assyrians, and finally, the Chaldeans (Babylonians). Her prostitution knows no limits.

“Yet you were not like a whore, because you scorned payment! Adulterous wife, who receives strangers instead of her husband! Gifts are given to all whores; but you gave your gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from all around for your whorings” (16:31b-33).

Such becomes Jerusalem’s lusting after the gods of other nations that she even sacrificed her children to them! What, then, will come of all this?

“I will judge you as women who commit adultery and shed blood are judged, and bring blood upon you in wrath and jealousy. I will deliver you into (the nations’) hands, and they shall throw down your platform and break down your lofty places. They shall bring up a mob against you, and they shall stone you and cut you in pieces with their sword. Because you have not remembered the days of your youth, but have enraged me with all these things; therefore, I have returned your deeds upon your head, says the Lord God” (16:38-39, 40, 43).

But what caused Israel to reject God’s great love for Judah and to prostitute herself? Ezekiel describes what went wrong by writing the following:

“I (Yahweh) passed by you again and looked on you; you were at the age for love. I spread the edge of my cloak over you, and covered your nakedness; I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord God, and you became mine. Then I bathed you



with water and washed off the blood from you, and anointed you with oil. You were adorned with gold and silver, while your clothing was of fine linen, rich fabric, and embroidered cloth. You had choice flour and honey and oil for food. You grew exceedingly beautiful, fit to be a queen. Your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, for it was perfect because of my splendor that I had bestowed on you, says the Lord God.

But you trusted in your beauty, and played the whore because of your fame, and lavished your whorings on any passer-by. You took some of your garments, and made for yourself colorful shrines, and on them played the whore; nothing like this has ever been or ever shall be. You took your sons and your daughters, whom you had borne to me, and there you sacrificed to them to be devoured. As if your whorings were not enough! You slaughtered my children and delivered them up as an offering to them. And in all your abominations and your whorings you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare, flailing about in your blood” (16:8-9, 13-16, 20-22).

There was nothing particularly beautiful or special about Israel that caused God to set his love upon her or to choose her, Ezekiel tells the reader; that is the meaning of the term “flailing about in your own blood”. In the words of Deuteronomy, “It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you – for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you” (Deut. 7:7-8a). It was not that Judah was so beautiful and special as she “lay naked, flailing about in (her) blood”. It was simply that God looked upon her, had compassion on her in her distress, and decided to rescue, choose and love her. He loved her because he chose to love her, not because there was anything inherently lovable about her!

So, because he loved Israel and chose her, God blessed her, gave her great prosperity and success, and by caring for her turned her into a great beauty. The result was that “(her) fame spread among the nations”. But it was only “because of my splendor that I had bestowed on (her), says the Lord God” (vs. 14).

But Judah “trusted in (her) beauty, and played the whore because of (her) fame” (vs. 15). She took the great gifts God had given to her out of love, and she prostituted herself with them.

In essence, Judah’s sin was this: she lost sight of the fact that all that she had become and had accomplished was the direct result of God’s blessings given to her out of love. Instead, she kept on assuming that her greatness was due to her own skill, beauty and effort. The result was that she lost all sense of responsibility toward God and her people for the sacred management of her gifts. Instead, she saw her position in life and those gifts as her right to use as she saw fit. And she chose to use them by prostituting herself to the “Powers” of her day in order to curry their favor and to gain their support – thus adding, she thought, to her power and her influence.

There are two applications of Ezekiel’s teaching in this passage. The first insight is in the doing of systems analysis. Keep in mind that Ezekiel is writing about “Jerusalem” – that is, a corporate, social entity symbolic of the nation of Judah and the people of Israel. That is, it is a corporate entity about which he is writing, not a personal or individual entity. He makes that

quite clear throughout the chapter. So what Ezekiel is doing here is making a profound systems analysis.

All that a nation or a city has of power, fame, success, prosperity, or even beauty has been bequeathed to it by God, Ezekiel is teaching. It is that nation's or city's responsibility, and the responsibility of its political, economic and religious systems to be faithful stewards or trustees of all that God has invested in them – and this they do to serve the common good – the “commonwealth” of their people.

When, however, these systems begin to assume that it is “(their) power and the might of (their) own hand (that) have gotten (them) this wealth” (Deut. 8:17), and when they begin to lose sight of the fact that it is God's blessings upon them coming out of his heart of love for them but assume instead, that it is due to their own skill, beauty and effort, they have begun down a slippery slope of corporate collapse. For the result of such thinking will inevitably be a prostituting of their calling and responsibility to whatever “Powers” will appear most to enhance their power and wealth, and thus they will fall victim to manipulation and control by the most evil, lustful and power-crazed elements of those “Powers” rather than to be true to the best to which they have been called. And the ultimate result of such prostitution is their own inevitable collapse and disintegration, both of their own organization and of the society they have been called to serve.

This brings us to the second application of this scripture. The second application – which is, by the nature of this passage, a secondary application that is still important to make – is an individual and a personal application. It is the reminder to us that all that we are and all that we have accomplished is a gift from God, and is not due to our “skill, beauty or effort”. All that we are and have is the result of God, through Christ, arbitrarily and graciously choosing to love us when he saw us “naked and flailing about in our own blood”. God chose us because God chose to choose us. He loved us because he chose to love us. He called us to serve him through our service to the world – simply because that is what he wanted us to individually do to contribute to the building of his shalom community. And if we have taken advantage of that calling and have learned from it and built an effective service to others, it is because God placed in us both the capacity and ability to take advantage and learn and build and teach, and the willingness to do so. *All* is a gift from God – not just all our possessions or all our vocation, but all our skills and drive and wisdom – all of this is gift from God!

If we ever begin to operate out of the assumption that it is “my power and the might of my hand that have gotten me this wealth” – that anything that we are, have or have achieved has come about because of our initiative or hard work, then we have begun “down that slippery slope of (personal) collapse”. If we give ourselves over to perceiving our success in self-serving of self-congratulatory ways, then we will end up prostituting ourselves to whatever people, organizations or agendas will seem to enhance our power, success or wealth. We will end up serving them, will become intensely unhappy and unfulfilled, and will work ourselves into an early grave. That is the inevitable result of forgetting that all we have and are, including all our skills, effectiveness and success, is a gift from God and consequently acting as if our primary task on earth is to be a success rather than continually undertaking the sacred management of those gifts God has given us for the enhancement of his kingdom.

The second insight that comes by working on this passage is the profound impact that such corporate and individual loss of a system's or a person's origins and centeredness in God's graceful love and call has on the "Powers" and people around us. Ezekiel points out how Judah's infidelity and faithlessness to God's call affected the performance of the "Powers" around her – and how they affect her. The result is that all of them contribute to the disobedience and eventually the destruction of each other.

“Like mother, like daughter’. You are the daughter of your mother, who loathed her husband and her children; and you are the sister of your sisters, who loathed their husbands and their children. Your mother was a Hittite and father an Amorite. Your elder sister is Samaria, who lived with her daughters to the north of you; and your younger sister who lived to the south of you is Sodom with her daughters.” (16:44b-46).

What Ezekiel then goes on to point out is how both the pagan nations around Judah (the “Hittites”, the “Amorites” and “Sodom”) and how the other Jewish nation (“Samaria” or the northern kingdom of Israel) have influenced and been influenced by Judah. Each nation and their political, economic and values-setting (“religious”) systems (each nation’s “daughters”) lost a sense of calling by God and responsibility toward their people, and have become oppressors, exploiters and controllers of their people and of each other. They have thus contributed to each other’s penchant for doing the same. They have all gotten caught up in an immense downward spiral, both being influenced by and influencing each other’s lust for power, prestige and possessions – rather than any of them acting to reform, call to accountability, or seek to reverse the deterioration of each other. Together, they could have built a “peaceable kingdom” of justice, the equitable management and distribution of wealth and of relationship with God. Instead, they have kept on influencing each other’s downward spiral leading to destruction and collapse of all that they hold dear.

Incidentally, it is intriguing to note Ezekiel’s statement of the sin of Sodom. It is often taught that the sin of Sodom for which it was destroyed (Genesis 18:16-19:29) was sexual perversion and “sodomy” – primarily because of the illustration used in Genesis 19:1-11 to encapsulate the sinfulness of Sodom. Not so, says Ezekiel. The sin of Sodom is much more profound and deep than sexual perversity. Here is what Ezekiel writes in this passage.

“This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it” (16:49-50).

The sins of which Ezekiel accuses Sodom – and for which they were destroyed – is pride (“*my* hand and *my* might have gotten me this wealth”), inequitable distribution of wealth, exploitation of the poor and powerless, injustice and control. Only in the final phrase “(they) did abominable things before me” is sexual perversity suggested – and then it is only hinted at (presumably the “abominable things” they “did before me” would be a reference to cult prostitution and sexual excesses within the context of the worship of God – which would be consistent with the cult prostitution surrounding the worship of Ba’al at that time). But it is important to note that the sin by which Sodom is now exclusively labeled (“sodomy”) is only the

final of a long list of sins detailed by Ezekiel, is only hinted at, and by its final listing in the hierarchy of accused sin, seem as only one of the contributing sins. The real sin of Sodom, according to Ezekiel, is economic, political and religious exploitation, not simply sexual perversity (although it certainly includes that).

The third insight of this passage is that God still continues graceful action toward us, even in the midst of his judgment of us (16:44-52).

“Yet, I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish with you an everlasting covenant. Then you will remember your ways, and be ashamed when I take your sisters, both your elder and your younger, and give them to you as daughters, but not on account of my covenant with you. I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the Lord, in order that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I forgive you all that you have done, says the Lord God” (16:60-63).

Here is, indeed, the gracious God – despised, rejected, even cuckolded, and yet forgiving, still loving his spouse who has so flagrantly played the whore and been crushed by this, ready to take her back and restore her again to that to which he had originally called her. A new covenant God will make with Israel – a covenant built on the old one, and yet a new one that builds upon the present realities and out of which a secure relationship will be built. This is God’s loving kindness toward Israel – a long commitment in the same direction!

And also toward us! This passage is yet another reminder of God’s continuous forgiveness of us, and his call to us to become under him all that he has created us to be! This is a great reminder – and a triumphant thought by which to end a truly painful chapter!

**Ezekiel 22:1-31** is likely the apex of social analysis in the Bible, in which this prophet describes how Israel’s political, economic and religious systems became corrupted from God’s intentions for them, the impact such corruption had both upon the people and the prophets (the spiritual leaders) of Israel, and the inevitable consequences of a society so going awry.

“The word of the Lord came to me: You, mortal, will you judge, will you judge the bloody city? Then declare to it all its abominable deeds. You shall say, Thus says the Lord God: A city! Shedding blood within itself; its time has come; making its idols, defiling itself. You have become guilty by the blood that you have shed, and defiled by the idols that you have made; you have brought your day near, the appointed time of your years has come. Therefore I have made you a disgrace before the nations, and a mockery to all the countries” (Ezekiel 22:1-4).

This prophecy is written just before the final conquest of the southern kingdom of Judah (all that was left of Israel) by the Babylonian empire. In this chapter, Jerusalem is seen as a symbol for Israel, as it faces its final destruction.

The message of Ezekiel in chapter 22 is very painful. Jerusalem will be conquered by Babylon, and in its destruction, all that is left of Israel will be eliminated. Israel will be no more and the dream of God's shalom community will seem extinguished from the earth. What has brought God's people to such a tragic place?

Chapter 22 can be divided into three parts. Part I consists of verses 1 through 12. In this section, Ezekiel explains why God is so angry. Israel has abandoned God's call to be his nation of shalom in both their actions and their rhetoric. Instead, it has become so immoral that it has become a reverse witness to God. The rest of the world looks at the lifestyle of Israel and concludes, "If that is what it is like to follow Yahweh, then let me follow a far more just god like Ba'al!" Thus, God's people who were chosen to introduce the shalom community to the world have become the worse kind of evangelist -- for they witness to every other nation against Yahweh rather than for him and his kingdom.

Part II consists of verses 13 through 22. It takes the argument a step further. It presents what God is going to do with Israel in the light of their extreme unfaithfulness to him. What God will do is that he will destroy Israel in order to purge the evil from them, for they can no longer be trusted to carry the vision of the shalom community. After their captivity by Babylonia, a remnant of Israel will emerge -- those who have personally embraced relationship with God and justice and equality with humanity -- and it will be that remnant that will create a future for Israel.

But it is Part III that contains one of the clearest and most significant social analyses in scripture. Whereas Part I asks "What went wrong?" and Part II asks "What will be the result of such wrong-doing?", Part III asks the question "What were the forces that caused Israel to go astray? How did they wander so far from God's intentions from the m?" Let's look at that analysis.

### **A Religion of Domination**

"Its priests have done violence to my teaching and have profaned my holy things; they have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have disregarded my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them" (22:26).

The purpose of the religious system, according to Deuteronomy, is to enable the nation and city to embrace a relational culture -- to be in active personal relationship with God and each other. But by Ezekiel's time, what has the religious system done with that commission?

To make sense out of Ezekiel's critique of the religious community, one must ask the question, "How did Israelites at the time of Ezekiel believe that they could come into a right relationship with God?" The answer is "through obedience of the Law of Moses". But how were Israelites to know what the Law required of them, since most could not read? The only way they could know would be if the priests would tell them.

That is the point of Ezekiel's analysis of Judah's religious system. "(The religious system has) made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have disregarded my Sabbaths". God has entrusted into the hands of the priests the responsibility of sharing the information the people need in order to obey the Law and act rightly before God. But the priests refuse to give to the people the information they need so that they might act obediently toward the Law. They have refused to tell the people whether what the people are doing is "clean" or "unclean", "holy" or "common", "sacred" or "secular".

"Why" one must ask, "would religious leaders refuse to give to the people the information they need in order to be in a right relationship with God?" The answer is obvious. The withholding of vital information places control in the hands of the priests! If I don't give you the information you need and you become increasingly desperate for that information, I am able to control you as long as I withhold that information. And if I am able to control you over a long-enough period of time, I can begin to dominate you in every way.

This, of course, is the essential weakness of any system that helps to set and maintain the values and beliefs of a society. That system can move very easily from believing in its values to using its growing authority to press down these values upon the people "for their own good". When it does so, the values it promulgates will subtly shift so that the system will seek to build its power through insisting upon its values, and will twist those values so that they will serve the purposes of the political and economic powers of its society. This is what the professional religionists of Ezekiel's world were doing – they were creating a *religion of domination*.

Thus, any of the values-forming systems of any nation -- not simply the church and religion, but also the public and private educational systems, the world of entertainment, the media, communications and information-provision systems (newspapers, television news, radio, Internet and worldwide web, Facebook, Twitter, etc.), the world of advertising, the business world, the sports world -- can use their power to communicate and to provide information to control the thinking of entire generations of that nation and even of the world. And once they become successful in controlling the thinking of people, then those systems can create a culture of dominance in which they in reality shape the way an entire people think and what they value. Thus, a culture of dominance can emerge, which then in turn replaces a relational culture.

Recently, I was invited to lecture on the systems in the business department of a Christian college. During the course of my lecture, I asked the students what should be the chief objective of a business run by Christians. "To make a profit", one student answered. I asked the class if they agreed or disagreed. Everyone agreed. So I countered that, to my mind, Christians had the obligation to run their business with the primary objective of producing high-quality goods or to provide the best service, and the *result* of such quality work would be both a high volume of business resulting in a profit and a witness to their faith that relationships are more important than money. They thought that was hopelessly naïve. One student put it most succinctly. "I have no problem in producing a product I know is inferior or to provide poor service, because I want to keep my costs down. That's OK, because what I care about is making as much money as possible!" Thus had these "Christian" students adopted the values of their culture and their

culture's economic and political systems that would lead them to run their businesses with premises no different than those who might run an Enron or WorldCom or Tyco.

### **A Politics of Oppression**

“(Israel’s) princes within it are like a roaring lion tearing its prey; they have devoured human lives; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows within it” (Ezek 22:25).

The next system with which Ezekiel deals is the political system. Its task, according to the Deuteronomic vision, is to work through its judicial and monarchical structures to provide justice for all the people. But what have the “princes” done with this responsibility? Ezekiel informs us they have “devoured human lives; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows within it”. Most intriguingly, they are likened to “a roaring lion tearing its prey”.

Those entrusted with the responsibility of equitably administering justice have instead become those who are mass oppressors of the people. Their concern has shifted from justice to that of wielding power. The reference to “made many widows within it” is a reference to the Josian wars in which King Josiah took advantage of the collapse of the Assyrian empire to expand Israel’s landmass, conquer nations and restore the empire boundaries of Israel’s greatest king, David. But why had he done that? There was no justifiable reason except for monarchical hubris, for it provided for Israel precious little wealth or bargaining position. But the price paid for such hubris was the death of an entire generation of young men in a fruitless war (thus Ezekiel’s reference to “the king has made many widows within the nation”), and such a serious weakening of the nation’s military strength that Babylonia, once recuperated from its defeat of Assyria, could easily conquer Israel’s army, take Jerusalem and destroy Judah within 23 years.

Ezekiel’s analysis of what went wrong politically in Israel, therefore, was that the political system, called by God to order society through justice for all, had instead become oppressors of the most vulnerable people and groups of that society – doing this solely for material gain! The political system, rather than guaranteeing justice, had practiced a *politics of oppression*!

This is precisely the great temptation of every political system since time immemorial -- to serve its own ends and to join with economic and religious systems to accrue power at the expense of the people, even if that means the oppression and control of that people. How that happens is presented in the next section – even in something as apparently innocuous as a credit card!

### **An Economics of Exploitation**

“Its officials within it are like wolves tearing the prey, shedding blood, destroying lives to get dishonest gain. . . . They take bribes to shed blood; (they) take both advance interest and accrued interest, make gain of neighbors by extortion; and (they) have forgotten me, says the Lord God” (22:27, 12).

The reference to “officials” is a reference to the economic system of the nation.

The responsibility of the economic system, according to Deuteronomy, is to be faithful stewards of the nation’s wealth so that there could be an equitable distribution of that wealth in order to eliminate poverty. But what have Israel’s economic leaders done?

The business leaders of Israel had moved from seeing the purpose of business as being that of providing a service or of quality goods, to embracing its purpose as making the biggest profit possible (22:27). They took bribes. They charged interest in their loans – something explicitly forbidden in the Law. They extorted (22:12). They had brought about a profound change in what they perceived as the mission of business.

What had occurred in Israel was a significant shift in the thinking and actions of its economic leaders. They had moved from seeing the wealth of Israel as God’s wealth held in common for the entire society, to perceiving themselves as the principal owners of private wealth. Thus, they had changed from understanding themselves as *stewards* to viewing themselves as *owners*. The result of that shift in perspective was a profound change in the way Israel’s economic leaders used the nation’s wealth -- for they used it for their own purposes and profit, intentionally exploiting the poor, marginalized and powerless of that society to increase their wealth. They were practicing an *economics of exploitation*.<sup>20</sup>

It is here fitting to note that Ezekiel uses the term “wolves tearing their prey” to describe the economic system (22:27a), whereas he uses the term “roaring lion” to describe the political system (22:25a). It is worth speculating on what Ezekiel had in mind by likening these two systems to these two specific animals. I believe that the key to understanding these mysterious references is to consider the hunting styles of both creatures.

The lion stalks her intended prey, seeking to get into striking distance without being seen. She does this because she does not possess great speed and must therefore use the element of surprise in order to catch her prey. Having come within striking distance, she springs from the cover, pursues and captures her intended prey. She strikes by leaping on the animal’s back, bringing her 350-500 pounds down in a mighty strike upon an animal that might weigh between

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<sup>20</sup> The argument has been made that the Deuteronomic vision of stewardship of wealth in order to equitably distribute such wealth and eliminate poverty is the advocacy of a communist economy and that reading Ezekiel as a critique of an exploitive economy is an intentional criticism of a market economy. Such an argument both exhibits a misunderstanding of these contemporary economies and a failure to appreciate the economy in Israel before the Babylonian captivity. Communist economics is state ownership of the means of production with the state determining the production of goods and services and setting the pricing for the same and the wages to be paid for production of the same. A market economy is the placement of the means of production in the private sector, with prices and wages set by supply and demand. Biblical economics was birthed in an agrarian society in which there was shared production of produce on “birthright” land. As Israel became more “settled”, that economy increasingly began to look like the economy of the nations around it, with land and the means of production increasingly gravitating to a political/economic elite living well on the agricultural surplus of its peasants. Thus the sabbatical legislation of Deuteronomy (see “Deuteronomy” in this chapter) and the jubilee legislation of Leviticus (see “Leviticus”) “represent a unique Israelite attempt to combat the social evils that had infected Israelite society and to return to the idyllic period of the desert union when social equality and social concern had prevailed” (*Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1974. Vol. 4, p. 577).



50 and 300 pounds. The animal, of course, goes down under the weight. As the animal falls, the lioness uses her powerful jaws either to sever the spinal cord or the jugular vein of the animal. The kill, therefore, is quick, clean and complete in one swift action.

The wolf hunts in an entirely different manner. Although it will eat rabbits and rodents as a dietary mainstay, the wolf's favorite meal is elk, moose or deer. Not possessing the strength or weight of a lioness, wolves must hunt in packs to bring down prey weighing between 500 and 800 pounds. The strategy the wolf pack uses to accomplish this objective is to get a herd of elk, moose or deer running. Possessing the endurance to run at high speed for long periods of time, the wolf pack begins to wear out the herd. Gradually, the youngest, oldest and weakest of the herd fall to the rear. The pack selects one of the most vulnerable from the back of the herd, culls it out from the rest of the herd and proceeds to bring it down. This they do by stopping the animal and then biting and tearing its Achilles tendons. The animal, paralyzed, sinks to the ground. The wolf pack then does not usually kill the animal; they simply gather around it and begin eating it, and weakened by loss of blood, flesh and muscle and in great pain, the animal dies.

By likening the lion to the political system and the wolf to the economic system, Ezekiel is making a profound analogy regarding the capacity of both systems to dominate and control their societies. The political system is a discernibly dominating power. It "kills" its intended victims directly and efficiently, using the law, police or military as its instruments of elimination. It understands and uses both violence and the threat of violence as its primary means of domination, and does so under the protection of the laws it itself has created both to protect itself and to dominate and control its "subjects" (even its language is dominating).

The economic system, not given the powers of the law, police or military, must "kill" in a different way. It cannot appear overtly violent. Instead, it must gain economic dominance over the people by setting the economic (and sometimes even the social) standards of a society (i.e., "herding" the people), pressuring the society to vigorously pursue those standards (i.e., "running the herd"), and then noting those who do not have the economic power, education, capacity or position to stay up with the rest of the herd. The economic system thus "culls out" from the running herd the weakest, most marginalized and most vulnerable people and people-groups that will become their intended victims. Those groups that will tend to be most vulnerable will be the poorest and least powerful groups -- dominated ethnic groups, women, those without invested wealth and those whose social standards differ from the norm. Because these "minorities" are perceived as "different" and even unacceptable by the general public, their exploitation will tend to receive the least notice or defense by that public (running elk don't return to protect the weak who have been culled off by the wolf-pack).

The economic system doesn't set about to quickly destroy its victims; to do so would lessen that system's capacity to make money off them. Instead, they "nip" and "bite" away at them, little by little weakening them but not quickly killing them so that the economic system "eats alive" the economically weakest, most marginalized segments of that society. And the rest of that society never even notices what is happening!

A simple example of the economic system's capacity to devise means that legally enable the "herd" to better their life-style while exploiting the poor is the credit card. The credit card is, in reality, an efficient means by which a user borrows money from a bank or financial institution to make purchases. Its purpose is to increase debt while encouraging a growing economy by increasing the spending capacity of the people. The "religious" (i.e., values-creating) systems of advertising, the media, entertainment and sports are used to encourage the purchase of goods as the primary means by which we can improve both our lifestyle and bring fulfillment or joy to life (no woman will ever consider a man sexy if he doesn't own the advertised sports car). The political system cooperates by passing laws that make an exception to the nation's laws of usury so that the credit card providers can charge compound interest on unpaid credit card debts that exceed what the law allows financial institutions to charge for any other medium of loan. Thus, every system "wins". The retail business community makes a greater profit by radically increasing sales. The production community makes a profit through increased production of goods. The financial community makes excessive profit through its charging of compound interest on unpaid credit card debts. The political system radically increases its tax base on the goods sold. The values-formation communities (advertising, communications, sports, etc.) make residual profits through the generation of more advertising, sports-endorsements, etc.

And who loses? The poor and the marginalized of society! They are as encouraged to "shop till they drop" as are the rich and middle-class. But it is the poor and marginalized that have the most to lose in participating in this vehicle of purchase. The rich and many middle-class can afford and choose to pay off all their purchases each month, thus avoiding high interest rates. But the poor and many over-extended middle class people cannot afford such monthly pay-offs, and soon find themselves both in inextricable debt and owing exorbitant interest.

But the victims of the "Credit Card Phenomenon" are not just the poor and marginalized. It is also the middle-class and even some rich. The seducing call of our economic, political and religious systems (especially the advertising industry) to purchase more, has resulted in an accumulation of credit-card debt that moves far beyond the poor and working classes to most of the middle-class and even among the well to do. Thus, credit-card debt grew from 56% of disposable income in 1983 to 81% by 1995. 29,000 personal bankruptcies now occur *every week* in the United States. One-third of all Americans have no savings. Another third have less than \$3,000 in investments and savings.<sup>21</sup>

By likening the political system to lions and the economic system to wolves, Ezekiel is making a profound commentary on how each of these systems pursues domination of their society. Combined with his insightful analysis of the priestly strategies used to gain control over the shaping of the values of a society, Ezekiel has presented a profound analysis of how the systems of society act to dominate rather than to liberate a society.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ichito Kawachi and Bruce P. Kennedy, *The Health of Nations* (New York: The New Press, 2002), pp. 77-82.

<sup>22</sup> Is this presentation on the economics of Ezekiel an advocacy of zero-sum economics? Zero-sum economics is the theory that there is a static amount of wealth that is available and that, consequently, the only way one person can increase his economic position is to deprive another person of some of that wealth.

It would be easy to interpret the biblical social analysis of a nation's economy as "zero-sum economics". But I can't find in scripture any suggestion that wealth is fixed. Although it was certainly not the aggressive growth economy we know today, the biblical economy was a slowly growing economy when measured over hundreds of years.

## A Dangerously Descending Spiral

The Jewish Torah and the New Testament both describe a Godly society in terms of an *ascending spiral* of humanity coming into an ever-expanding relationship with God and each other, an increasingly just political system, and an economic system managing its wealth as stewards so that the most equitable distribution of that wealth may occur and poverty be eliminated.

What Ezekiel is clearly describing here is the exact opposite. Presenting that dynamic as a *descending spiral*, Ezekiel perceives that the decay of a society begins with its economic system, and the perception of its managers that their primary task is to make as great a profit for themselves and their economic entity, no matter how much that leads to the exploitation of the people. The more the economic system exploits the people, the more it will need to call upon the political system to use its power to oppress by its capacity to create and interpret laws to favor the economic system. Thus, the collusion of the political system with the economic system allows for and permits greater exploitation.

But a political system can oppress only so far before it begins to lose its credibility with the people. Thus, it must depend upon those structures in society that create, teach and maintain that society's values to "bless" the political and economic systems. In our society, those structures include public and private education at all levels, marketing, entertainment, news media, the electronic communications systems and even professional sports. Thus, the "religious" system uses its influence of persuasion, emotion and logic to maintain the people's obedience to and support of these systems. Such control of people's priorities, values and beliefs then gives permission to the economic system to undertake even greater exploitation -- which it inevitably will do.

How do we see this spiral of domination at work in society? How do we see systems in collusion together to use their respective power to oppress, exploit and control the responses of

But what biblical writers were insisting is that a nation must be socially responsible, and key to such responsibility is the way it exercises its economy. When speaking of a nation's economy, I have sought to capture that nuance by consistently using the word "equitable" rather than "equal" (i.e., an "equitable distribution of wealth"). To my mind, "equal" would mean an identical distribution of wealth, operating out of the perspective that there is only a static amount of wealth to be distributed. "Equitable", on the other hand, suggests carefully constructed vehicles in an economy to periodically redistribute wealth so that no one in that economy experiences either extreme poverty or extreme wealth. Biblical vehicles for doing that were no-interest loans, the sabbatical year, the personal "adopting" of a poor family, and the Year of Jubilee. One such 20<sup>th</sup> century American device which was intended to redistribute wealth (but which became sabotaged over the years) was the graduated income tax. It is not our task in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to blindly implement biblical vehicles, but rather to develop our own means so that we, in the particularities of our world's economy, work "so that there will be no poor among us".

The biblical point is simply this: there is no excuse for poverty existing in a nation or world of great wealth (such as in Solomon's empire). It is the disparity between its wealthiest and poorest families which is the true index of the spirituality of a nation – not how often the leaders say "Lord, Lord" or how often prayers are offered. From the Biblical perspective, the wealth of a nation exists in order to be used for the reduction of the poverty of its people. If this does not happen in a nation, then the phenomenon that will occur will be a steadily-increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of an increasingly-powerful few, growing oppression of the marginalized, and an increasing determination of what we should believe and how we should think as a people. This is what we saw happen to Israel. And this is what will happen to us!

the people? The credit card illustration presented above is such a subtle collusion (that is what makes it and comparable economic vehicles in capitalistic society so dangerous). But so is the accumulation of wealth and power in the heads of a very few; that is happening very rapidly in the United States.

How rapidly? Consider the following: Between 1979 and 1995, male college graduates realized an increase of only 1% in their income (averaging for cost-of-living). High school graduates experienced a *decline* of 17% in the buying power of their income. And those who did not graduate from high school had a 27% *decrease*.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, the C.E.O.'s of the 100 largest companies in the United States each went from an average annual income of \$1.3 million to \$37.5 million – 1,000 times the pay of their production crews! “The 13,000 richest families in America had almost as much income (in 1998) as the 20 million poorest households.”<sup>24</sup> However, they gave 35% of all campaign dollars in recent presidential elections;<sup>25</sup> guess who gets a hearing?

Thus, Ezekiel is describing a *descending spiral* of domination. The more the economic system exploits, the more the political system will oppress. The more oppression occurs, the more the values-creating system of that society must control and shape people's thinking. Control leads to greater exploitation that leads to greater oppression that leads to greater control that leads to greater exploitation that leads to greater oppression, and on and on and on and on. This continues until that society has so decayed that it is fast approaching its own internal collapse or external destruction!

What can stop the declining spiral of the economic, political and “religious” systems of a city or nation? According to Deuteronomy, the reformist forces in society are the prophets and the people. But note what Ezekiel states will happen to the prophets and people in a society in which the systems are growing increasingly corrupt.

### **The Prophets Seduced**

“Its prophets have smeared whitewash on their behalf, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, “Thus says the Lord God,” when the Lord has not spoken.” (22:28).

The first reformist force is the *prophet*. In Deuteronomy, the office of the prophet was created by God and society for one purpose: to declare “Thus says the Lord” to the political, economic and religious systems of that society and to its people. They were to be the voice of God to the systems in order to hold them accountable to fulfill in society the specific role God had created for each of those systems.

But what have the prophets of Judah done with their responsibility to call their king, priests and merchants to accountability? They have “smeared whitewash” over all the misdeeds

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Krugman, “For Richer: How the Permissive Capitalism of the Boom Destroyed American Equality”, *The New York Times Magazine* (October 20, 2002), pp. 64, 65.

<sup>25</sup> Kawachi and Kennedy, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

of these systems, covering with a coat of white paint the acts of exploitation, oppression and control of Israel's systems as they sought to dominate both the people of Israel and God.

Worse yet, the prophets have not only sought to cover-up the misdeeds of the systems. They have attempted to fool the people and the systems into thinking that they were doing the will of God by operating dominating systems. This is an extremely severe criticism Ezekiel is making, since Deuteronomy had declared, "But any prophet who . . . presumes to speak in the name of the Lord a thing that (God has) not commanded the prophet to speak -- that prophet shall die!" (Deut. 18:20) Thus, by lying, the prophets of Israel were either defying God or indicating that they really didn't believe in Yahweh after all!

Would prophets say "Thus says the Lord God, when the Lord had not spoken"? Indeed they would. Consider the prophet Hananiah (Jeremiah 28:1-17). Hananiah was the preferred prophet in Israel who prophesied that God would soon destroy Babylon and return its Jewish captives to Judah. Jeremiah took him to task, declaring "in the presence of the priests and all the people" that his prophecy was wrong and, in fact, a deceit. Hananiah refused to accept Jeremiah's rebuke and used his power and influence to undermine Jeremiah's credibility. Jeremiah responded, "Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you made this people trust in a lie. Therefore thus says the Lord: I am going to send you off the face of the earth. Within this year you will be dead, because you have spoken rebellion against the Lord." (Jer 28: 15-16). That is exactly what happened (vs. 17)!

Why would a prophet lie, knowing the extreme consequences of his lie? A key is given in the words, "Hananiah . . . spoke to me in the house of the Lord, in the presence of the priests and all the people" (28:1b). Hananiah was getting great benefit from giving a false prophecy. He was receiving the attention, belief and adulation of the people and was probably receiving great benefit from the king, the priests and the business establishment for strengthening their domination of the people rather than questioning it. Jeremiah was thrown into jail several times, was beaten and starved; Hananiah received no such treatment, but rather the benefits of popularity.

The systems do not want to be held accountable. They cannot freely dominate the people and at the same time be accountable to the heavenly vision for the city or nation. Therefore, leaders of the political, economic and religious systems will do whatever they can to seduce the prophet -- to buy him off with praise, attention, prestige, money or position. And if they fail to seduce him, then the systems will find ways to "kill" him -- either physically or in reputation.

In the United States today, I would not count the church among the "religious" systems. Christianity has become too marginalized to be a significant values-creating system today for any but its own constituency.

That is why I believe that, in the United States, a significant role to which the Church is being called is that of prophet. It needs to be a voice crying, "Thus saith the Lord" to the political, economic and values-creating systems of our society. The church's most effective means in calling the nation's systems to accountability is through the organizing of large numbers of people and institutions in a city or nation to stand before the systems, remind them of

the democratic foundation upon which they have been built and pressure them to be just, equitable and relational in all that they do.

But to the degree that the church is successful in that pursuit, to that degree the systems will seek to seduce or threaten the church. So, beware when the City Council wants to award your church a plaque, or invites you to open their sessions with prayer, or suggests a program your church can perform for the poor and offers you the funding to carry that out. Beware if they use zoning rules to stop you from building a church or threaten a lawsuit or engage in character assassination. For the systems will do everything they can to seduce or “kill” church leaders who threaten their capacity to dominate, control, oppress or exploit!

### **The People Co-opted**

“The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress. And I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one” (22:29-30).

The second reformist force is the *people*. The task of the people, in the Deuteronomic formula, is to apply to their own lives God’s call to the systems, to teach this way of life to their children, and in so doing hold the systems accountable to act out their responsibilities. But Ezekiel presents one of the saddest results of systems that have become dominating, oppressive and exploitive. It is that the darkest characteristics of the systems are passed on to the people.

Seeing the systems “grabbing for all they can get,” the people begin imitating the systems. Even though those values of greed, power and domination are unarticulated, the people hear those values expressed in the actions of the systems. And the people consequently begin to embrace those values for their own. Toward each other and especially toward the most vulnerable in their midst, the people also become dominating, oppressive, and exploitive. So it is that God seeks “for anyone among them who would . . . stand in the breach before me on behalf of the (people), so that I would not destroy it -- *but I found no one!*” (22:30b)

Is this not what is happening to American culture today? Have we -- the people -- learned our lessons well from decades and generations under political, economic and values-building systems that are out to get what they can get and thus to dominate? Has the poison now reached to the heart and soul of the people?

A recent advertisement being aired on radio and television depicts a small town where the streets are empty, the porches deserted, people no longer gather to visit with each other. Where are all the people, the advertisement asks? Then we discover them. They are at home, all of them accessing the Internet in order to trade on the stock market and to make a great deal of money. “Where did old Mr. Jones get the money for such a fancy red convertible?”, the advertisement ends. And the advertisement informs us he got that money from successfully playing the stock market on the Internet.

What is most tragic about this advertisement is that the company promoting such a use of the Internet presents this message of empty streets and destruction of the relational culture of that town *as a positive change!* The advertisement's premise is that the chief end of human beings is to make as much money as possible! It doesn't even perceive that what it is proposing will, if truly embraced by the people, destroy this nation -- for we will surrender the common good for making more money over the Internet! "I sought for anyone to stand in the breach . . ."

What Ezekiel 22 is teaching us is that when systems become corrupt enough, they will relentlessly corrupt the prophets and the people who will be seduced by them and will join with them in their exploitation, oppression and control of that society. The people will be infected with the systems' greed. Thus, the only forces that can work to hold the systems accountable will themselves become a part of the corruption of that society. And when that happens and keeps on happening in a society, there is no hope for that nation or civilization!

### **The Inevitable End**

"Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them; I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath; I have returned their conduct upon their heads, says the Lord God" (22:31).

Within these final words in the prophecy of The Bloody City, the greatest tragedy lies. When society has sunk far enough, Ezekiel tells us, God has no choice but to destroy it. That is precisely what happened to Israelite society. The people who had been liberated from Egyptian slavery, who had met God at Mt. Sinai and had been given the Law Code that would become a witness to the rest of the world of how God intended all humanity to live would become the people who had embraced the priorities of personal wealth, oppression and exploitation that symbolized the worship of the god Ba'al. This is how the nation called out of slavery by God would end -- political, economic and religious systems corrupted beyond their capacity to be reformed, religious leaders seduced by the power and wealth of the systems, and a people who were "aping" their leaders in an equal pursuit for control, power and money. Such a society, Ezekiel is telling us, will inevitable, eventually collapse and end!

And how will they end? Here come the most depressing words of Ezekiel. God says to Ezekiel, "I have poured out my indignation upon them; *I have returned their conduct upon their heads*, says the Lord God." (22:31)

How will the end come to such a society? God will bring about the collapse of that nation -- *by doing nothing!* God will simply allow that nation's inevitable collapse happen. No great defeat at the hands of an enemy is needed! No great external threat! Make the external threat simply the action that pushes the rotten society over the edge!

How will the end come? God will lift his hand of blessing off that nation, and simply let it experience the consequences of its own action. God will simply allow the systems, out of their greed and commitment to domination, to destroy themselves, the people and that society (22:31).

The nation and its people will collapse and be destroyed by destroying themselves through their own greed! God will let them reap the whirlwind from the wind they have sown! (Hosea 8:7)<sup>26</sup>

Ezekiel 22 presents us with one biblical analysis of what went wrong and what keeps going wrong in society, so that the systems act to exploit rather than to empower the people. However, there are many other instances in scripture that undertake the same social analysis built upon a Deuteronomic vision of how human society is meant by God to function. Let me urge you to use Ezekiel's social analysis as a template to examine this sampling of scriptures: Exodus 1:8—5:2; 1 Kings 10:14-27, 9:15-21, 5:13-17; 1 Kings 18:20-40, 21:1-24, 22:1-40; Matthew 23:1-39; Acts 22:30—23:35; Ephesians 2:11-22, 3:7-13; Revelation 17-18.

What this social analysis throughout the entirety of scripture is telling us is that whether you are poor, middle-class or rich, whether you are black, brown, red, yellow or white, whether you are a tenth- or first-generation citizen of your nation, you are radically influenced by the values and practices of the economic, political and religious systems of your country and of the world. And when those systems increasingly embrace an economics of greed and exploitation, a politics of dominating power and oppression, and a "religion" of values-maintaining control, then you are on your way to becoming a person who will internally embrace those same values and will thus become increasingly centered on accumulation, control and greed, more captured by your culture than by your faith, less concerned for the poor and marginalized among you, and less able to cry for your nation's embrace of the shalom community!

## **DANIEL 10:1--11:2**

**Daniel 10:1—11:2.** Most biblical scholars today, whether they are evangelicals or liberals, will agree that sin, as it is described in the scripture, is both individual and corporate. It is now generally accepted by professionals in that field that sin goes far beyond "the naughty things we do" or even the state of our character ("total depravity"), so that it also has to do with the corporate, the social dimensions of life, and even can be politically and economically systemic.

But it seems to me that the Bible gives witness to an even-deeper dimension of sin that in the scriptures is labeled as "demonic" or "angelic", or (as it is referred to today) the "interior spirituality" of a political, economic or religious entity (e.g., a city, nation, international corporation, or worldwide religion). The biblical theologian who has most worked with this dimension of biblical faith is Walter Wink, who coined the phrase, "interior spirituality". Wink, who by no stretch of the imagination would be labeled either theologically or politically conservative, wrote of his own journey, "In other Jewish and Christian sources I discovered ancient sages who believed that everything in creation has its own angel. That meant, I concluded, that everything has both a physical and a spiritual aspect. The Powers That Be are not, then, simply people and their institutions, as I had first thought; they also include the

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<sup>26</sup> See the commentary in this chapter on Ezekiel 10:3-11:34 to discover the specifics of how this national end will occur.



spirituality at the core of those institutions and structures. If we want to change those systems, we will have to address not only their outer forms, but their inner spirit as well”.<sup>27</sup>

What is the “interior spirituality” of a church, a city or a nation and its systems? The biblical language used to describe such corporate spirituality is the language of angels and demons!

Today both liberal and evangelical Christians have a hard time with angels. Many of a more liberal theological persuasion (unlike Wink) simply dismiss the biblical emphasis on angels as being the attempt by a pre-scientific people to explain an apparently indescribable phenomenon of reality. Those of a more conservative theological bent may give recognition to the concept of angels, but relegate them to “heavenly” business and place wings and halos on them so that they do not need to be taken seriously. In either case the result is the same: the believer dismisses the biblical witness about the phenomenon of angels because it does not fit into a secular and scientific world perspective.

The reality, however, is that the Bible is full of references to angels and demons. If we are to take the Bible seriously as our primary authority for faith and practice, then we must examine honestly what it has to say about angels. Precisely because their minds would not have been prejudiced by a scientific perspective of the world, it could be that the biblical writers had a profound understanding of reality that we miss today.

What is the biblical teaching regarding the angelic and demonic? According to the biblical witness, every corporate unit of society is given its guiding or “brooding” angel. This perspective of “brooding” is particularly important and is given voice as early as the first creation story.

“Now the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:2). The sense of the Hebrew word *rachaph*, here translated “swept” but in other translations is “hovered” or “brooded”, is the word used for the “brooding” of a barnyard hen or another bird over her nest and chicks. The image is one of God’s protectively surrounding the earth he has just created as a great egg, much as a hen guards and protects her egg which she has just laid.

Each unit of society is protected and directed by its brooding angel, according to scripture. Because of this, in the book of Revelation, the letters to the seven city churches in Asia Minor are not addressed to the churches, but to the protective angel of each church (see the commentaries on Revelation 1:9-3:22 in this chapter). It is Jerusalem’s angel who defeats the Assyrians and brings the miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem from her enemies! In what is considered a salvific event comparable to the parting of the Red Sea and Israel’s return from Babylonian exile, the biblical writer records the following.

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<sup>27</sup> Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), p. 4. Wink’s monumental study on this subject is the three-volume *The Powers*, consisting of *Naming the Powers* (Fortress Press, 1984), *Unmasking the Powers* (Fortress, 1986), and *Engaging the Powers* (Augsburg Fortress, 1992).

“That very night the angel of the Lord set out and struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies. Then King Sennacherib of Assyria left, went home, and lived at Ninevah” (II Kings 19:35-36).

But it is not only churches and cities that are protected by brooding angels. Nations are also. In a remarkable statement in Deuteronomy 32, Moses sings in his great canticle, “When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods; the Lord’s own portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share” (Deut. 32:8-9).

The phrase, “the gods” in this context is a Hebrew euphemism for “angel” (e.g. Job 1:6, Ps. 29:1, Ps. 82:1-2). What Moses is declaring in this hymn is that every nation is watched over and protected by a guardian angel (Dan. 10:13, Ps. 29:1, 82:1-2, 89:6). Israel, however, is the only nation whose destiny is directly supervised by God.

The angel of a city, church or nation, Scripture tells us, exerts immense power and can radically influence the human institutions with which they deal. It even has the spiritual power to resist God. This is nowhere made so plain as in the scripture lesson that is the subject of this commentary – Daniel 10:1-11:2.

Daniel 10:1-11:2 tells of a crisis in Daniel’s life in Babylon. As in all the conflicts he faced, Daniel turned to God in prayer for direction and strength. But this time, his prayers seemed to be offered in vain. There seemed to be no answer.

Then, one night, this scripture tells us, Daniel is awakened from a deep sleep to receive an awe-inspiring visitor. Next to his bed stood an angel, who said to him, “Daniel, don’t be afraid. God has heard your prayers ever since the first day you decided to humble yourself in order to gain understanding. I have come in answer to your prayer. The angel prince of the kingdom of Persia opposed me for twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief angels, came to help me, because I had been left there alone in Persia” (Daniel 10:12-13, TEV).

This is a most remarkable statement. Daniel had prayed to God. God prepared an answer to Daniel’s prayer and gave it to an unnamed angel to deliver. On his way from the courts of God to Daniel in Babylon, however, the angel had to pass through the land of Persia. There he was confronted by the guardian angel of Persia, who was so powerful that he held God’s messenger at bay for twenty-one days. The messenger angel would have never gotten through with God’s answer to Daniel’s prayer, except that Michael, the chief archangel, came to his aid. Even now, the angel told Daniel, Michael continued to battle the angel of Persia. The messenger angel concluded, “Now I have to go back and fight the guardian angel of Persia. After that the guardian angel of Greece will appear. There is no one to help me except Michael, Israel’s guardian angel” (Dan. 10:21 TEV).

What does this remarkable passage tell us about angels? We should not allow our secular – supposedly sophisticated – scientific framework to get in the way of perceiving the truth revealed in this story. I believe that what the biblical writers are telling us in terms of the church, a city, and a nation is that everything in life has a spiritual dimension. The political system of a

city consists of more than its people, structures and values. That system is infused with a spiritual essence; it has unimagined and unexplored inner depths that are its “soul”. The angel of a city, therefore, is the biblical vehicle for speaking about the inner spirituality that broods over that city. That spirituality has immense power, either for good or for ill.

Whether it is a church, a city, an industry, a nation, every structure of human society has an inner spirituality. Every city has its brooding angel that hovers over its individuals, its families, its neighborhoods, the church, its economic institutions and its political order. I once had a leader of a church which had a reputation as a “clergy-killer”, say to me, “You know, we’ve always blamed our pastors for our problems. But it can’t always be the pastor’s fault. It is as if there is something almost alive in us that has to keep finding a victim to sacrifice!” Although an institution’s brooding angel might have dimensions of good in it, it is usually that “there is something almost alive in us that has to keep finding a victim to sacrifice”. Thus, every unit of human society is a battleground between God and the forces of evil for both the people and the systems of that society!

### **HOSEA 3:1-5; 9:7-8; 10:1-10**

**Hosea 3:1-5** tells of God’s instructions to Hosea to purchase a prostitute, which he does. Hosea says to her “You must remain as mine for many days; you shall not play the whore, you shall not have intercourse with a man, nor I with you” (3:3).

Then Hosea’s commentary on this acted-out parable follows: “For the Israelites shall remain many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim. Afterward the Israelites shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; they shall come in awe to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days” (3:4-5).

Just as the prostitute is “set aside” from her prostitution for “many days”, so Israel shall be “set aside” for a long time in captivity. They will be deprived of their rulers, their priests and the comfort of their worship. In other words, their systems will be removed from them as they live under pagan systems over which they will have no control. Only after a considerable exile, when adequate repentance and restitution has occurred, will they be returned to the land and will come to God. Only after their return will they “come in awe to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days” (3:5b).

It intrigues me that Hosea is presenting here that Israel, as a nation, and the Israelites, as people, cannot be purged of their sins unless they are deprived of their political and religious systems. In other words, the corruption of Israel originates and is sustained within and by their systems. Therefore, there is no healing of the people of Israel until and unless they are removed from their systems and, consequently, those systems die. There is no personal conversion unless there is corporate purging. It is actually better for Israel to operate under pagan systems which are, in essence, detached from them than it is for them to be under God-designed systems that have gone so seriously awry that they are beyond redemption. It is better to start all over again. And that, of course, is exactly what happened through Babylonian captivity, Persian restoration

and then Nehemiah's designing of a new Jewish system that was consistent with the template of the old God-designed system of Deuteronomy.

**Hosea 9:7-8** describes how the leadership of Israel justifies its refusal to listen to Hosea and to thus repent their actions and policies. The prophet writes, "The days of punishment have come, the days of recompense have come. Israel cries, "The prophet is a fool, the man of the spirit is mad!" Because of your great iniquity, your hostility is great. The prophet is a sentinel for my God over Ephraim, yet a fowler's snare is on all his ways, and hostility in the house of his God" (9:7-8).

How can the authorities handle a prophet? They can seduce him, ignore him or kill him. This is how to attempt to mitigate the impact of a prophet.

In this passage, the political, economic and religious leadership of Israel seeks to "kill" Hosea by undermining his credibility. Get people to doubt him, and his influence can be effectively "killed". Thus, Hosea is called by Israel's leadership a "fool", and that he is "mad". But in reality, the prophet is a sentinel on guard duty, ready to warn if danger approaches. A sentinel is ignored at one's own peril, and that is precisely what is happening to Israel, Hosea insists. Thus, his message is being ignored and he is losing his credibility through the character assassination being done by the Powers, who hope to undermine and even discredit him. This is how to handle a prophet. If you cannot seduce him because of his integrity, and if his words and actions are having too much impact to ignore him, then the systems will seek to "kill him" – and killing his reputation is as effective as killing his body (in fact, it may be more effective, because physically killing him always opens the possibility of his being perceived by the people a martyr). This is a very contemporary word for prophets among us today!

**Hosea 10:1-10** begins, "Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit. The more his fruit increased the more altars he built; as his country improved, he improved his pillars. Their heart is false; now they must bear their guilt. The Lord will break down their altars, and destroy their pillars" (10:1-2).

The prophet presents his message through parallel construction. Describing Israel as a fruited, luxuriant vine, he builds two parallel images. "The more his fruit increased" is meant to parallel "as his country improved" – a reference to the growing wealth and power of Israel. The second parallel construction is "the more altars he built" and "he improved his pillars" – that is, the result of the nation's growing wealth and influence was its increasing worship of the gods of wealth and influence. Obviously, we know the meaning of the category "altars", but the reference to "pillars" seems more obscure. However, the term "pillars" in the Hebrew Bible is a reference to the habit of those participating in Canaanite (pagan) worship to raise stone columns to mark the site of their worship of Ba'al (envision a small Stonehenge). This is how we know, from the parallel construction of "altars" and "pillars" that Hosea is referring to the temptation in the northern kingdom of Israel to worship the pagan gods of Canaan, rather than Yahweh.

What is being presented here by Hosea is an old story often repeated by the Israelite prophets. Israel first follows God and the covenant faithfully. Thus, they are rewarded by God for their faithfulness by becoming increasingly prosperous. The more prosperous they become, the more they abandon God and his dreary, hemmed-in commandments, instead pursuing the “gods” of wealth and power. Thus, “their heart (has become) false, (and) they must bear their guilt.” So God must punish them and destroy their wealth, in order to return them to Him.

Hosea points out that Israel no longer recognizes Yahweh as their king (10:3), but instead worships “the calf of Beth-aven” (vs. 5). This is a reference to the idolatrous worship of Israel that was built around the fecundity and nourishment of the cow.

But such worship will not protect Israel. “The (calf) itself shall be carried to Assyria as tribute to the great king. Ephraim<sup>28</sup> shall be put to shame, and Israel shall be ashamed of his idol” (10:6).

The result of such religious idolatry and social injustice resulting from Israel’s lust for power and wealth will be their inevitable destruction as a nation. Hosea concludes his prophecy, “Samaria’s king shall perish like a chip on the face of the waters. The high places of Aven, the sin of Israel, shall be destroyed. Thorn and thistle shall grow up on their altars. They shall say to the mountains, “Cover us”, and to the hills “Fall on us”. I will come against the wayward people to punish them; and nations shall be gathered against them when they are punished for their double iniquity” (10:7-8, 10).

## **AMOS 2:4-16**

**Amos 2:4-16** is the completion of the exceedingly dramatic opening of the book of Amos. Amos was a shepherd from Tekoa, a small village about ten miles from Jerusalem. But he apparently spent much of his adult life in the northern kingdom of Israel rather than in his native Judah, for it was in Israel that a majority of his prophecies were delivered. Amos’ preaching was profoundly penetrating in its analysis of the political, economic and spiritual sins of Israel, and his imagery was particularly dramatic – still catching and holding the reader’s attention even 2800 years after it was first delivered.

The opening chapters of the prophecy of Amos begins with the words, “The Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds wither, and the top of Carmel dries up” (1:2). And what is it that Yahweh roars?

Using the formula of “For three transgressions and for four, I will not revoke the punishment”, Amos speaks judgment on God’s behalf to the pagan nations around the Hebrew people – Syria (1:3-5), the Philistines (1:6-10), Edom (1:11-12), Ammon (1:13-15) and Moab (2:1-3). Coming closer to home, Amos then speaks judgment against the first of the two Hebrew

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<sup>28</sup> The titles “Ephraim”, “Samaria” and “Aven” (actually “Beth Aven”) are other names for “Israel” – the northern kingdom. The reference to “high places” is a reference to the primary worship sites of the pagan nature gods – a hill upon which the “pillars” and “altars” of that god would be erected and the people gather to participate in orgiastic worship.

nations – Judah, his home country (2:4-5). But it is for the northern kingdom of Israel that Amos reserves God’s heaviest judgment (2:6-16).

The essential sin of the pagan nations declared by Amos was the sin of domination – of an overwhelming lust for power, greed and control on the part of each nation’s respective political, economic and religious leadership. But with his analysis of the sins of Judah and Israel, the two Hebrew nations, Amos’ critique subtly shifts.

First, there is a prophecy against the southern kingdom of Judah. “Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Judah and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they have rejected the law of the Lord, and have not kept his statutes, but they have been led astray by the same lies after which their ancestors walked. So I will send a fire on Judah, and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem (2:4-5).

Judah is condemned for being unfaithful to God and the Law. In essence, the other nations who do not know Yahweh are not condemned for their idolatry because they didn’t know any better! Instead, they are condemned for destroying their potential for the building of a relational culture. They are condemned for their acts of injustice, exploitation and the building of unilateral power.

But Judah is condemned for destroying its relationship with God. Judah had seen, firsthand, God’s deliverance of the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery, God’s giving to it of the Law and the covenant, God’s gift to them of the Promised Land, God’s intervention in their national lives over and over again. Judah should have known better!!! There had been no doubt of God’s engagement with Judah over hundreds of years. So how can Judah therefore ignore God, deny him and seek to build their national life devoid of God? So they must be held accountable “because they have rejected the law of the Lord” (2:4b).

But Amos’ focus now shifts to Israel. “Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals – they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed” (2:6-8).

Amos’ critique of Israel is profoundly different than either his critique of the pagan nations or of Judah. The pagan nations are criticized for practicing a politics, economics and religion of domination – with Israel as its target. Judah is called to account for disobeying the Law and breaking the covenant between itself and Yahweh. But Israel is not critiqued for either of these sins, but for something profoundly different.

The critique of Israel is that it is acting unjustly to its society’s weakest and most marginalized people. It is practicing inappropriate and morally offensive sexual practices and it is engaging in cult prostitution and in religious practices that are the opposite of what appropriate worship of Yahweh should be about. They are not criticized for being faithless to the Law and covenant because it has been well over a century since they even acknowledged the Law as being

determinative for their life together. They are not criticized for embracing a dominating culture because as of this time in their history, they haven't thoroughly embraced such a culture. They are taken to task for manifesting the sins of rebellion, experimentation and irresponsibility. They are in the process of breaking away – far beyond continued obedience to the Law but not yet thoroughly embracing a unilateral culture. So they are criticized for actions that reveal a steadily advancing spirit of rebellion against Yahweh and against the kind of society God would seek to create out of the Law.

It has been suggested by many observers of religion that a nation moves through five distinct stages when it moves from the embrace of a common faith to secularization or other faiths. The first stage is society lived under that common faith; individuals may choose to dismiss or ignore that faith, but all assume that it is formative for that nation. The second stage is the rise of distinct alternatives to that common faith; those alternatives may come in the acceptance of the presence of a multiplicity of religions or an increasing commitment to secularism or materialism. The third stage occurs when that commitment either to multiplicity or secularism becomes dominant, so that commitment to the former faith that the people of that nation hold in common moves into a distinct minority. It is in this stage that the “old faith” is rejected by the public and private institutions of that nation, along with a significant majority of that country's people.

The fourth stage is a crucial transitional stage. Although the “old faith” is rejected by the majority of the people and/or by that nation's institutions, they still continue to hold to the public ethics and private morality of that “old faith”. The religion is erased before its ethical structure is rejected. But because that religious faith is no longer held, the logical foundation for the ethics of that society, both corporately and individually, has been seriously compromised, and that leads to the fifth stage. The fifth stage is the collapse of that “old faith's” public ethical system, as a new ethics is gradually embraced consistent with the secularism or new religion of that nation.

What makes the study of Amos' condemnation of Israel so fascinating is that one can see that very process occurring in that nation. At one time, the ten northern tribes of Israel and the two southern tribes were not only one politically and materially, but also spiritually. That is, they all held to a common Law code that ordered their lives together and was centered in their worship of Yahweh as their God. When the Israelite empire split to form the northern kingdom of Israel (the ten tribes) and the southern kingdom of Judah (the two tribes of Benjamin and Judah), and the symbolic center of that empire and its underlying religion remained in Judah (the Temple in the city of Jerusalem), the northern kingdom needed to develop alternative faith- and decision-making sites. They did so by founding a capital city of Samaria and the establishment of an alternate religious shrine at Bethel. To establish such sites and begin worship there also meant an increasingly *rapprochement* with the established religion of Ba'al. Thus, the northern kingdom moved through stages two and three over the next several hundred years. As the “old faith” of Yahweh receded from memory, the old ethical standards of Yahweh worship (acting justly toward the poor, being sexually chaste, not engaging in cult prostitution) were still initially preserved as the right way to act toward each other. What Amos is talking about here is the slippage of Israel from holding to the ethics of a Yahweh worship they no longer embraced (stage three) to the ethics of the Ba'al worshippers around them (stage four)! So what one is able

to observe, in reading the book of Amos, is a nation in transition away from the belief in Yahweh and the Law but not yet wholly committed to the public ethics and private morality of the worship of Ba'al! It will take another generation for that transition to be completed. Thus, by the time of the destruction of the northern kingdom in 722-721 BCE, the people's identification with Yahweh and the Law had been so expunged that they quickly assimilated into the Assyrian nation and disappeared as a distinct people from history. And that happened because there was nothing distinct about them anymore!

## **OBADIAH 1:15-18**

**Obadiah 1:15-18** is a short writing of a prophet about which we know nothing. The name "Obadiah" means "worshipper of Yahweh" or "servant of Yahweh" – and that is all we know about him. The political situation implied in the book itself would suggest that he prophesied after the Exile and soon after Israel's return to the Promised Land. And the internal evidence indicates that he knew nothing of Nehemiah and Ezra, so he probably preceded them. And that's about all we can surmise about this otherwise unknown prophet.

The prophecy of Obadiah is directed to Edom, Israel's contiguous neighbor nation which occupied the land of Judah after Judah's leadership had been taken into captivity by the Babylonian empire.

The prophecy is a short prophecy – only one chapter in length. But Obadiah makes three important points in the parameter of that one chapter. First, he accuses Edom of pride (verses 1-10). Second, he confronts them about the way they took delight in and participated with Babylon in bringing about the defeat and demise of Judah (vss. 11-14). But it is the third point that makes up the major insight of Obadiah.

The third emphasis of Obadiah deals with the inevitable outcome of Edom's sin. Convinced of their own impregnability, Edom has been vicious and vindictive toward Judah. What, then, will God do with them?

"As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head. For as you have drunk on my holy mountain all the nations around you shall drink; they shall drink and gulp down, and shall be as though they had never been. But on Mount Zion there shall be those that escape, and it shall be holy; and the house of Jacob shall take possession of those who dispossessed them. The house of Jacob shall be a fire, the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esau stubble" (vss. 15b-18a)!

"As you have done, (Edom), it shall be done to you"! Aiding and abetting Babylon's destruction of Judah, Edom will experience destruction in its turn. "Your deeds shall return on your own head," and you will experience all that you helped to bring upon God's people. It will now be Jerusalem ("Mount Zion") that will escape the threat of other nations (as it did under Nehemiah). Instead, Judah shall take back all the land Edom has taken from them and Edom will be as stubble before God's great conflagration! "Those who have been saved shall go up to Mount Zion to rule Mount Esau; and the kingdom shall be the Lord's" (vs. 21).



It is to be the fate of Edom (Mount Esau) to be perpetually under the rule and authority of Judah (Mount Zion) because of the intentionality and vindictiveness with which Edom shared in the destruction of Judah when it was at its most vulnerable before the invasive might of Babylon. The reality is that even a nation cannot hurt the children of God and get away with it!

**Micah 1:1-16.** Micah was an 8<sup>th</sup>-century BCE prophet who was a contemporary of Amos, Hosea and Isaiah. Like Isaiah, he prophesied primarily to the Powers and the people of the southern kingdom of Judah. Much of his prophecy is similar to that of Isaiah. But he had a much more keen concern for the poor and powerless, likely generated from his own humble origins (Micah grew up in a small and poor village, while Isaiah was likely of a noble family). It is Micah who gave both to Israel and to the church the most pithy and profound statement of the essence of biblical faith, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love each other tenderly and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Micah begins with a critique of the northern kingdom of Israel (which is symbolized by calling it the name of its capital – Samaria, much as we would refer to the USA as “Washington”). “What is the transgression of Jacob? Is it not Samaria? And what is the high place of Judah? Is it not Jerusalem? Therefore, I will make Samaria a heap in the open country, a place for planting vineyards. I will pour down her stones into the valley, and uncover her foundations. All her images shall be beaten to pieces, all her wages shall be burned with fire, and all her idols I will lay waste. For as the wages of a prostitute she gathered these, and as the wages of a prostitute, they shall again be used” (Micah 1:5b-7).

God comes forth from his holy place to judge Israel and Judah (1:2-4). Micah proclaims that God sees the sin of the northern kingdom to be unfaithfulness to him – the symbolism being that of prostitution. It was Samaria’s refusal to follow Yahweh but, rather to seek to be like all the other kingdoms of the world, which led Judah – the southern kingdom – astray. And this the northern kingdom did simply in order to build its own economic and political power. Therefore, it will be punished severely and destroyed. Samaria will be utterly wasted as a city – her walls destroyed, her buildings leveled to their very foundations, her economy crushed, and her religion wiped out. She accumulated all this wealth and power by rejecting God and prostituting herself before the gods of all the other nations. Well, now she will forfeit that wealth and power, and it will all be taken from her.

From Israel, Micah then moves on to a critique of the southern kingdom of Judah. He writes, “Israel’s wound is incurable. It has come to Judah; it has reached to the gate of my people, to Jerusalem” (1:9).

Micah’s image is a very vivid one. He describes the northern kingdom’s lack of social justice, ignoring of the Law, and abandonment of Yahweh as a deep gash in its side that has become severely infected. The red track of that infection has moved down the side of Israel into the southern kingdom of Judah and to its capital city of Jerusalem. The result is that Judah has become severely infected with the festering wound of Israel, infected with injustice, oppression

by its ruling class and exploitation of its people so that now Judah's leaders ignore the Law and abandon corporate and individual life centered in Yahweh. "It was the beginning of sin to daughter Zion, for in you were found the transgressions of Israel" (11:13b).

What will become of the southern kingdom in the light of the fact that it has taken on the sins of its northern sister? Why, what will happen to it is exactly what has already befallen Israel. "I will again bring a conqueror upon you, inhabitants of Mareshah; for they have gone from you into exile" (1:15a, 16b).

**Micah 2:1-12** continues the prophet's social analysis, concentrating particularly upon the people's response to his message. That response is not positive. Micah describes those in positions of political influence or economic power. He describes them as lying sleepless at night as they create plans to more effectively exploit people. Then they awake from their sleep, recall their draconian strategies and then enact them. "They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress households and houses, people and their inheritance" (2:2).

But rather than rise up angry at such injustice, Micah reports, each Israelite simply endorses this power and wealth grab, and gets involved in it himself (2:3-5). And when Micah seeks to expose this abuse of power, the people say to him, "Do not preach – thus they preach – one should not preach of such things; disgrace will not overtake us" (2:8). Micah finds the attitude of the people so disturbing that he sarcastically responds, "If someone were to go about uttering empty falsehoods, saying, "I will preach to you of wine and strong drink," such a one would be the preacher for this people" (2:11)!

Micah 2:1-11 deals with a Judah that has ignored the Deuteronomic covenant, has forsaken Yahweh as the focus of their nation's life and has acted with economic and political oppression. To my surprise, therefore, 2:12-13 is very positive with the theme of restoration.

"I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob, I will gather the survivors of Israel; I will set them together like sheep in a fold, like a flock in its pasture; it will resound with people" (2:12).

In the midst of intense social criticism of Judah, Micah speaks words of hope and promise. He recognizes and acknowledges a restoration of a punished Judah, a remnant that will choose to be faithful. That is a continuing reminder to me that even in the darkest circumstances, there is hope. God is still not done with God's people! Rather, he is always ready to do a new thing – even in the midst of evil and even in spite of ourselves rather than because of ourselves!

**Micah 4:1-10.** Most Old Testament prophets are single-issue seers, stressing the nation's shortcomings, and especially their unwillingness to obey the Law and to apply it to both the nation's public and private life. And Micah is as penetrating as is any prophet in such criticism. But along with Isaiah, Micah moves beyond criticism to the presentation of a vision of what the nation both can and will someday become. He presents hope and a vision to complement his painful social analysis. And no place is that as dramatically stated as in Micah 4:1-10.

The third chapter of Micah is a continuation of the criticism of both Israel and of Judah that dominates the first two chapters of this prophecy. He accuses Israel and Judah of abhorring justice and perverting equity in the court and in the marketplace (3:9). They are leaders who “hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off the people and the flesh off their bones” (3:2).

His greatest criticism, however, is for his fellow prophets (3:5-8), who use their gift of prophecy for their own self-advancement and accumulation of wealth, giving to the elite prophecies that confirm them in their acts of oppression and exploitation, thus legitimizing their misuse of power before the people (3:8-9).

But then the tone of Micah’s prophecy undergoes significant transformation in chapter 4. He states, “In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills. People shall stream to it, and many nations 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’” (4:1-2).

It is then that Micah comes forth with his most brilliant vision, easily equaling his later clarity of the nature of authentic religion, found in 6:8. What he writes is both the most magnificent poetry and the most penetrating vision of the world as God will someday make it become.

“Out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; 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 anymore; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken. For all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever” (4:2b-5).

God’s intentions for humanity, Micah tells the reader, is shalom! In fact, God’s intention is the extension of Deuteronomy’s shalom community to the entire world. This is what Micah is proclaiming here – a vision never articulated before in Israel. God will judge the nations. The result of that judgment is that all the nations will engage in mutual disarmament, they will give up warfare, and each nation will both live in a right relationship (shalom) with each other but will also live at peace, welfare and prosperity for all its peoples within every nation (vss. 3-4a).

What is most remarkable about this vision of Micah’s, however, is his statement that the nations will not embrace relationship with Yahweh! They will all continue in the worship of their respective gods (vs. 5), but God will bring about a shalom throughout all humanity – whether they recognize the origins of that peace having come from God, or not!

“But (Israel) will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever” (4:5)!

Micah then continues his vision of the world and Israel’s embracing of that vision of the shalom community (4:6-13). In this section, he makes clear that it will be God’s redemptive

action that will gather an exiled Israel to Jerusalem as a sign of God's ingathering of all peoples. And this will be God's doing, not Israel's. Israel will gather as those who are weak and beaten ("lame" and "afflicted"); it will be God who makes the transformation happen. Therefore, Israel, in the midst of the darkness of its present and near-future state, can rest in the realization that God will someday liberate them and form them into the shalom community, prefiguring all of human society so transformed.

"In that day, says the Lord, I will assemble the lame and gather those who have been driven away, and those whom I have afflicted. The lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off, a strong nation; and the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion now and forevermore. And you, O tower of the flock, hill of daughter Zion, to you it shall come, the former dominion shall come, the sovereignty of daughter Jerusalem" (4:6-8).

But the bad must precede the good, the darkness precede the light! For Israel has and is sinning mightily against the Lord by embracing the values and standards of other nations, and thus scorning the shalom community. Therefore, "you shall go forth from the city and camp in the open country; you shall go to Babylon" (4:10a). Exile in Babylon<sup>29</sup> is absolutely essential for Israel's salvation as a people, because as a people they had turned their collective back so decisively on Yahweh's vision of a shalom community. "There (in Babylon) you shall be rescued, there the Lord will redeem you from the hands of your enemies" (4:10b).

Therefore, at the present, there are "many nations assembled against you", and you will receive God's punishment through them (vs. 11). "But they do not know the thoughts of the Lord; they do not understand his plan" (vs. 12). So God will use you to "thresh" them (vs. 13) in the future, as Israel becomes in fact the nation God has called them to be in theory!

**Micah 7:11-17.** Micah wrote, "A day for the building of your walls! In that day the boundary shall be far extended. In that day they will come to you from Assyria to Egypt, and from Egypt to the River, from sea to sea and from mountain to mountain. But the earth will be desolate because of its inhabitants, for the fruit of their doings. The nations shall see and be ashamed of all their might; they shall lay their hands on their mouths; their ears shall be deaf; they shall come tumbling out of their fortresses; they shall turn in dread to the Lord our God, and they shall stand in fear of you" (7:11-13, 16, 17b).

This is a description of a world which has finally given allegiance to Yahweh. The day of punishment and banishment of Israel has now come to an end; they have been restored to the land and begun the rebuilding of Jerusalem. And the other nations realize their mistake in persecuting Judah and ignoring Israel's God. In fear and trembling, they come before God and wait for his verdict and punishment because they have punished Israel. Therefore, in a profound

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<sup>29</sup> It is intriguing that the text clearly states "Babylon" as God's intended place for Judah's exile, because at the time of Micah (8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE), the clear enemy of both Judah and Israel was Assyria, and Babylon was an inconsequential nation. Some biblical scholars suggest that the name is a gloss, placed here by a later editor; others suggest that Micah was so politically discerning that he could see that in several hundred years, Babylon would be the dominant nation (just as astute British politicians during the Revolutionary War perceived that the USA would in due time rival the power of England). Still others assert that this is the nature of authentic prophecy – that it is "foretelling" as well as "forthtelling".

sense, Assyria, Egypt and Babylon (the meaning of the reference of “to the River”) have been the tools of God in bringing judgment and punishment upon Israel. But this doesn’t justify their actions. As Jesus later put it, “The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born” (Matt. 26:24). Because these empires are the means by which God has punished Israel, that does not justify their actions. They will still be held accountable for those actions – and their punishment is certain!

What is intriguing, however, is one verse about God’s role toward Israel that appears in the midst of what is otherwise a message of “come-uppance” of the enemy. “Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock that belongs to you, which lives alone in a forest in the midst of a garden land; let them feed in Bashan and Gilead as in the days of old” (7:14).

God is likened to a shepherd, both guiding and caring for his sheep – Israel. They are a “singled-out” people, a “flock” in the mist of the “wolves” of other, more powerful nations. But God will care for them and protect them, and thus they will feed in peace “as in the days of old”.

The message is that Israel will return to God. They will once again claim allegiance to Yahweh and will obey his covenant. They will once again become his Shalom Community, just as they had been designed to be. There is, indeed, a “future with a hope” awaiting them.

“So, in that light, take heart”, the prophet in essence says. Live in the knowledge that your nation will embrace its destiny of blessing all the other nations of the world, and life will be restored to Shalom!

### **NAHUM 3:1-7**

**Nahum 3:1-7.** Biblical scholars don’t know who Nahum was, since he is not mentioned outside the book that bears his name, and the only internal evidence is that he is from the small town of Elkosh in Judah. The book was written between the fall of Thebes to Assyria in 633 BCE (Nah. 3:8) and the fall of Ninevah and the Assyrian Empire in 612 BCE. The book deals with only one topic – the destruction of Assyria as the inevitable judgment of God upon it. Assyria was used by God to judge the nations, to terminate Israel because of Israel’s economic, political and religious corruption and refusal to repent, and to bring Judah to repentance under King Hezekiah. But Assyria was so harsh a victor, so oppressive, exploitive and controlling as a nation, and so cruel to all conquered nations and people alike, that they were a stench to God and would receive his inevitable punishment. Therefore, they will not only be conquered. They will be obliterated from the earth, never to exist again. For they are the inevitable and par-excellent manifestation of a truly evil empire.

It is in Nahum 3:2-3 and 6-7, that the terrible destruction wrought against Assyria is reported. But what is most stunning is Nahum’s description of the reason God would destroy it.

“Because of the countless debaucheries of the prostitute, gracefully alluring, mistress of sorcery, who enslaves nations through her debaucheries, and peoples through her sorcery, I am

against you, says the Lord of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face; and I will let nations look on your nakedness and kingdoms on your shame. I will throw filth at you and treat you with contempt, and make you a spectacle. Then all who see you will shrink from you and say, ‘Ninevah is devastated; who will bemoan her?’ Where shall I seek comforters for you” (3:4-7)?

No nation, no people, no person will mourn Assyria’s destruction! They have been so harsh in their conquests, so cruel in their rule, so dominating in their exercise of power that no one has been their ally! Everyone has been both delighted and relieved at their elimination. From the first, they have been a rogue empire. And therefore, *no one* mourns their passing.

This is a clear example, reduced to absurdity, of the unbridled use of unilateral power. Assyria had built its empire upon the cruelest of dominating, coercive, controlling power. It had given no quarter in its treatment of nations. And, therefore, it would be given no quarter. It used its power to dominate nations and people. And it used its great wealth to seduce nations and people, so that they were forced to cooperate economically with her, as well as politically and militarily. But even as nations cooperated with her, they resented her and hated her. And when the chance to overthrow arose, they took advantage of it! That is the inevitable fate of any nation, economy, religion or person that is ruthless in its intent and actions!

#### **ZECHARIAH 4:1-14; 9:9-10**

**Zechariah 4:1-14.** “Zechariah” was a popular Hebrew name, including a king of Israel (II Kings 14:29, 15:8-11) and the father of John the Baptist (Luke 1:5-67). It means “Yahweh remembers”. The Zechariah of this prophetic book was a contemporary of Haggai; he mentored under that prophet, taking his place after Haggai disappeared (presumably died). Zechariah carried on his prophet ministry for only two years (520-518 BCE) to urge the completion of the rebuilding of the Temple. The work on its restoration was completed in 516 (Ezra 6:15). The objectives of both Haggai and Zechariah was to see the Temple through to its completion, seeing its restoration as the necessary pre-requisite to the ushering in of the Messianic Age under the Persian governor Zerubbabel – who was a descendant of David. But although their objective was the same, their respective emphases were quite different. Haggai concentrated on the prosperity that would come to Israel and its people if they obediently rebuilt the Temple. Zechariah placed his emphasis upon the glories of the Messianic kingdom that would come when Zerubbabel would topple Darius (the Persian emperor) and be crowned king (6:9-14). Therefore, the prophecy tends to be apocalyptic in emphasis.

The dreams of Zechariah came tumbling down when Zerubbabel was suddenly removed from office by Darius in 518 and mysteriously disappears. A new non-Jewish governor, Bethel-Sharezar, was appointed (7:1-2), and a crushed Zechariah ceases to prophesy and instead enters into exile.

What is important about Zechariah’s prophecy, however, is not his analysis of the outcome of Israel’s political situation; it is clear he profoundly misread what would occur. What is important about Zechariah’s prophecy, and likely won him a place in Holy Writ, was his

understanding of how God works in a powerless situation. That perspective is particularly articulated in Zechariah 4:1-14.

Zechariah 4 is further insight on the combined work of the then-governor Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua. They are “the two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth” (4:14). They are the ones chosen by God to do a great work. Chapter four is essentially a prophecy of encouragement to Zerubbabel and Joshua, urging them to stay the course in the construction of the Temple. It says two main things:

First, “This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts” (4:6). In other words, Zechariah is telling the governor that the coming of God’s shalom community is not something that is obviously coming; there are not clear cut victories or achievements on the part of God’s people that act as earmarks of the coming of the kingdom. Rather, the shalom community will happen only when God determines that it will happen, and it will occur only by God’s intervention.

Second, “for whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice” (4:10). The actions that Zerubbabel and Joshua take, the successes they achieve, the advances made may seem very, very small – very insignificant. And this Temple, once completed, may also seem pitiable when compared with the grandeur of Solomon’s Temple.

But do not “despise the day of small things”. It is the accumulative days of small things that God will use to build his kingdom – day by day by day by day. It is the little victories won – the legislation passed to hire minority workers or the poor on city construction projects, the protection of seniors in nursing homes from the most recent state tax cuts, the insistence that the school board can’t balance the school district’s budget on the back of the mass laying off of teachers while protecting administrators, the young child won to Jesus Christ – it is the little victories won that gradually mount up to change a world!

So, do not be a despiser of small things. Because it is “not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts”!

**Zechariah 9:9-10** is a part of the chapter that begins the second section of the book of Zechariah. That section is mostly poetry, and is all oracles presented by the prophet. Chapter 9 deals with oracles against Syria, Phoenicia and Philistia, prophesying both the judgment and destruction of each nation. But God is going to do a different thing, a miraculous thing with Israel.

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the Rivers to the ends of the earth” (9:9-10).

Verse 9, of course, is the prophecy of the entrance of the Messiah into Jerusalem that is quoted by Matthew (21:5) at the time of Jesus' triumphal procession. In Zechariah's context, it tells us that the Messiah comes to Jerusalem in order to "command peace to the nations" and to establish God's rule, not only over Israel, but "from sea to sea" (9:10). Thus, Syria, Phoenicia, Philistia and even Greece (9:13) will join with Israel in living under God's shalom and humanity will live in peace and prosperity!

## **MALACHI 2:10-3:14**

**Malachi 2:10-3:14.** Most biblical scholars date the ministry of Malachi as being the decade 460 to 450 BCE. This was immediately before Nehemiah became governor of Jerusalem, for he served from 444 to 431 BCE. So Malachi's final prophecies precede the start of Nehemiah's ministry by six years. This makes what Malachi wrote extremely valuable – because it is giving us an independent reading of what life was like and what the essential issues were in Jerusalem immediately before Nehemiah began his ministry there.

In the book bearing his name, Malachi tells us that life was very grim in the Israel of 450 BCE. Palestine, of course, was living under the domination of Persia. It had just survived a series of natural disasters – a drought, a plague of locusts and a blighting of all the vineyards (Malachi 3:10-11). Those natural disasters had brought severe economic depression, even economic collapse upon the Jews to add to the shame and oppression of political domination by Persia.

The reaction of Judah to both political oppression and economic collapse was twofold. The first was that the people had concluded that they were powerless. That, in turn, had led to a deep resignation that manifested itself in a total breakdown of morality. If the people of Jerusalem no longer could set their own future or order their own lives, then why not "eat, drink and be merry – for tomorrow we die"? Malachi tells us that adultery, perjury, perverse sexual practices and intermarriage with pagans all were epidemic in Israel and signaled the collapse of Israelite life. Added to that was the victimization of the poor and the marginalization of the lowest classes of Jewish society by more powerful Jews (2:10-12; 3:5).

The second reaction of Judah to their political domination by Persia and their economic collapse was the belief of the people that they had been abandoned by God. Earlier, the Temple had been rebuilt and formal, orthodox Yahweh worship had been reintroduced to Israel. The restoration of the Temple initially provided a wave of revival throughout the land. But that soon wore off as both the people and the Israelite systems faced their worsening political and economic situation. Therefore, in resignation the people had by-and-large abandoned their religious traditions and practices that had earlier made them distinct among all Eastern peoples (1:14; 2:13; 3:7-14). They believed God had abandoned them. And therefore, they abandoned God!

Adding to this was both the apostasy and profound betrayal of the people by Israel's religious leaders. Israel's priests also felt abandoned by God! But they wanted to maintain their status and influence among the people. Therefore, they continued to formally conduct orthodox



worship (although very few Jews attended such worship), but they performed these liturgics in a perfunctory way while compromising their faith and practice. They were obviously very bored with Yahweh worship (1:7-8, 13).

This was the condition of the Jewish people in Palestine reported by Malachi only six years before Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem. This was the condition of the people that Nehemiah inherited when he was made governor of Jerusalem and authorized by the Persian emperor to rebuild that city's walls. Therefore, Nehemiah's insightful prayer in Nehemiah 1:5-7<sup>30</sup> was a very accurate reading of the situation. And Malachi has given us both an independent and a penetrating description of the Israelite condition in the 5<sup>th</sup> century before Christ.

### **MATTHEW 23:1-39**

**Matthew 23:1-39.** It is intriguing that, with the heavy examination of the Gospel of Matthew that appears in the lectionary (for most of the chapters of Matthew are included in the lectionary selections – with a given chapter examined as much as on three separate Sundays), that this chapter is excluded. And the reason why it is excluded is obvious – for it is the most blatantly confrontational passage that appears in that Gospel.

If we, as the church, are to work for the shalom community in the world as it is today, we will have to be willing to confront the systems and powers. But the tactic with which Christians have the greatest trouble is confrontation. Yet, of all the tactics, it is perhaps the most pivotal and strategic. I believe that the best person in the scriptures to help us to use confrontation is our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ!

Confrontation is an integral part of any empowering process – for a community, a city or even a church. But Christians have a hard time with the concept and even the practice of confrontation. We have trouble with it because we believe it to be inconsistent with a loving, Christ-like faith. But in reality, confrontation is the healthy process that enables humans to resolve pronounced differences of opinion. Frankly, you can't hope to bring about significant change – whether in a church or Christian organization or in the world – and avoid confrontation!

One of the difficulties we have with confrontation is that it seems so violent. But in reality, confrontation and violence are the opposites of one another.

Confrontation is the face-to-face, direct encounter between people, seeking the objective of resolution. It is, in reality, vigorous (and often, very convictional) negotiation. But the purpose of confrontation is not a ventilation of one's hostilities but the resolution of the differences between people and groups. The word "confrontation" literally means "at foreheads"

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<sup>30</sup> "O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments: let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned. We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses" (Neh. 1:5-7).

(“con” – “at” or “with”; “front” – “forehead”), so named by the ancients because when we confront, we unconsciously get “in each other’s face”!

“Violence”, on the other hand, is the exercise of physical force in order to gain one’s own way. The objective of confrontation is resolution; the objective of violence is to win. Whether it is a person or a government that is acting violently, the purpose of violence is to defeat the opposition, not to come to a negotiated settlement. In a profound sense, violence is often an indication that confrontation has failed. That is, people will resort to violence when their efforts to confront a system have met, not with the decision of the system to negotiate, but with the system either “stone-walling” or by acting violently itself. So violence and confrontation are opposites.

One of the most confrontive people in the Bible was Jesus. How confrontive was he? Well, simply consider the number of confrontive incidents in the ministry of Jesus that appear in just one of the gospels – the Gospel of Luke. There are 133 stories or incidents recorded in Luke in which the adult Jesus figures. Of those 133 stories, 116 are confrontive in nature! The remainders are primarily miracles or commentary (e.g., Jesus went from point “A” to point “B”).

Of the 116 incidents in which Jesus was being confrontational, 66 of these stories were confrontations of representatives of the religious, political or economic systems of either Israel or Rome, 45 were confrontations by Jesus of his disciples or followers and ten were demonic confrontations. One would have expected Jesus to confront the systems and demons. But given the significant number of confrontations by Jesus of his disciples and friends, one would have to say that Jesus was an equal opportunity agitator!

Only one action by Jesus in Luke was violent. That was the cleansing of the Temple (19:45-48) when he “began to drive out those who were selling things there”. One can argue that it was the cleansing of the Temple – that single resort to physical violence on Jesus’ part – that got Jesus killed, and not his many confrontations of the leaders of Israel. His confrontations made the leaders exceedingly angry, but it is significant to note that their decision to get Jesus crucified was not made until after his cleansing of the Temple (20:20; 22:1-6). Violence beget violence – and that was Jesus’ intention!

The inevitable question we must ask about Jesus’ confrontational ministry is, “What is at the heart of such confrontation by Jesus? What was driving him to confront friend and foe alike?” That question is perhaps most profoundly answered in Matthew 23:1-39.

Matthew 23 is the story of Jesus’ final confrontation of the Pharisees. Throughout the entirety of his ministry, Jesus has been calling on these religious leaders to see how their misuse of the Law has been to build up the power and wealth of the Jewish power elite of which they were part while covering it all with a veneer of piety. He had repeatedly called upon them to embrace the full Jubilee, to redistribute wealth so that poverty would be eliminated, and to proclaim both spiritual and physical liberty throughout the land. But they had refused, preferring to maintain themselves in positions of power and wealth rather than to seek the shalom of their people. Now their resistance to his message had built to a crescendo and Jesus burst forth in what can only be called a diatribe against them (if you want to capture the real power of that

attack, read Matthew 23:1-39 out loud and with conviction, and you will realize that Jesus was certainly not being “nice”!).

His final attack begins with these biting words: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it. *But do not do as they do*, for they do not practice what they teach” (23:2-3). That sets the theme for the remainder of the attack, as Jesus proclaims seven “woes” against these religious leaders. But Jesus’ intention in confronting the Pharisees comes out most clearly and poignantly in the closing lines of his argument against them.

“You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets, sages and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord” (23:33-39).

The Norse word that is the root for the English word “anger” is the word “grief”? Here you see that reality at work! Observe the profound grief and consequent anger of Jesus!

What was at the heart of such grief and anger? Why did Jesus confront? Jesus confronted the religious leaders of Israel (the Pharisees and scribes), the economic system of Israel (the Sadducees, priests, high priests and the Jerusalem religious aristocracy), and the political system (Pilate representing Rome; the high priest and Herod Antipas representing the local political order). He confronted them because they were the enemies of the people, and were committed to values building their own power rather than to build the shalom community of Israel (even though the Jewish leaders gave lip-service to practicing Jubilee).

But Jesus also confronted inside the community of faith. He confronted the disciples in order to prepare them for leadership of the church, for ministry with the poor and powerless, and to enable them to understand and articulate the values and vision of the Shalom community. The only people Jesus rarely confronted were the people – the poor, marginalized or weak. They already had enough dumped upon them!

What was driving Jesus to so relentlessly confront friend and foe alike? It was love! Jesus confronted out of love for those powerful Pharisees and scribes who would not see that their policies of greed and lust for power would bring about the destruction of their nation. He confronted out of love for the people who would eventually become the victims of the greed and power of those Pharisees and scribes through the horrible destruction of Jerusalem that those Jewish leaders would bring upon their nation. He confronted out of love for his disciples who

were responsible for building the vision of the shalom community, the kingdom of God, out of the destruction those Pharisees and scribes would bring upon their people! That was what was driving Jesus' confrontation!

Because he loved the people and his disciples and the nation's leaders so much, Jesus was agitational. His confrontation was for the purpose of agitation. He was seeking to agitate, because only out of extreme discomfort and agitation would (1) people be sufficiently motivated to change and (2) systems be forced to change or face themselves! The first did happen to some degree – some people profoundly changed and became the rock upon which Christ would build his church, seeking the transformation of Roman and Jewish society. Other people chose not to change, and missed the greatest revolution in human history! The systems would not change at all; they would not face themselves, but blindly sped on in their greed and lust for unilateral power – and their destruction at the hands of Rome became inevitable. And therefore, Jesus wept over the city.

### **JOHN 5:1-47**

**John 5:1-47** is the story of Jesus' healing of the paralytic and the consequences that ensue from that healing. This man had been an invalid for longer than anyone but the narrator can remember (38 years). But Jesus meets him at the Pool of Bethzatha (in some translations, called "Bethesda" and in others "Bethsaida") and heals him. But the text darkly states, "Now that day (that he was healed) was the Sabbath" (5:9b).

The predictable happens. The Judeans<sup>31</sup> – the Jerusalem aristocratic elite – take advantage of the fact that the healing occurred on the Sabbath, in order to condemn Jesus. They accuse him of breaking the Law, and are so enraged by his rebuttal of them by calling God his father, that for the first time a new note is added to the story line: "For this reason, the Judeans were seeking all the more to *kill* him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God" (5:18, italics mine). For the first time, John reports that the priests are considering the option of killing Jesus!

What stands out in this story is the twisted priorities of the religious elite. It is more important to them that the Law be kept than that a chronically-ill person be healed. The welfare of the people is of less priority to them than the minutia of the Law. And they are willing now to kill in order to maintain their control of the Law and of the life of Israel! This concludes John 5:1-18.

John 5:19-47 is, in essence, a trial. The Jerusalem ecclesiastical elite accuse Jesus of criminally breaking the Sabbath and blasphemy (making himself equal to God) (5:18). But in 5:19-47, Jesus makes his own accusation against the elite. They have elevated obedience to the

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<sup>31</sup> In the Gospel of John, there is frequent critical reference to the *Joudaioi*, which can be translated either "Jews" or "Judeans". It is clear from its context, however, that the group so condemned is not racial or ethnic Jews, nor is it of the Jewish nation. Rather, it is a criticism of the "Judeans" – the mix of Jewish aristocrats who made up the political, economic and religious elite of the nation. To make that differentiation clear, I have consistently translated "Joudaioi" as "Judeans" rather than "Jews".

Law (including its Sabbath regulations) to such a height that they are guilty of losing all compassion toward God's people and, consequently, of moral behavior. Thus, it is God and God's Son who stand in authentic judgment on them (5:19-29), not the other way around. They have elevated the Law above "eternal life" and thus, now face the "death" of condemnation. But God and God's people – particularly John the Baptist – witness to Jesus as God's Son and to his message (5:30-38). If the ecclesiastical elite would only read their own scriptures, they would see what the Law is truly all about, and would receive Jesus' message (vss. 38-44).

Wes Howard-Brook puts the issue of the fifth chapter of John very directly. "The mystery of the Judeans' sincere search but refusal to acknowledge the fruit when they find it, was one of the great puzzles the Johannine community had to face, one that surfaces again and again in the fourth gospel. It is similarly a problem that haunts discipleship communities in our own day: Why are so many religious leaders who claim to follow Jesus and who quote the Bible regularly so unwilling to recognize God's presence in the works of justice and peace? Why can so many ordinary Christians not hear the call to serve the poor and establish the beloved community together?"<sup>32</sup>

The result of such blindness is inevitable. Jesus concludes his attack of the aristocracy with the words, "Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say" (5:45-46)?

What Jesus is saying is that if only the Judeans would honestly and straightforwardly read the Torah, they would see that its message is a concern for the building of the Jewish community upon justice and morality, not on the obeying of the minutia of regulations. They would therefore see that these scriptures point to Jesus and on the kind of caring, just and supportive community which he was seeking to build.

But the fact is that the Jerusalem ecclesiastical aristocracy will not allow themselves to read the Mosaic Law honestly. And therefore, it will be that Law which, in the final analysis, will condemn them. Neither Jesus nor God will have to condemn them, for their own law which they so deeply revere, will expose them for the charlatans lusting after power and wealth that they are!

There is a secondary theme in this chapter which also needs to be noted. This chapter is intentionally constructed to contrast with John 9 – the story of the man born blind. John 9:1-41 tells the story of the healing of a man born blind. It is designed to contrast with this story of the man who Jesus heals of paralysis. There are striking similarities and striking contrasts in these two stories – similarities and contrasts that John purposely wants us to see in order to discern various ways that human beings can respond to Christ's liberating work on earth!

First, let's look at the striking similarities in these two stories. In both stories, the featured men are isolated, near a healing pool in Jerusalem. Both men are victims of an extended illness – the man in John 5 being paralyzed from the waist down for 38 years, the man in John 9

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<sup>32</sup> Wes Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God: John's Gospel and Radical Discipleship* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1994), p. 138.

being blind from birth. Neither man turns to Jesus for help. Instead, Jesus intentionally intervenes in both men's lives, and heals both of them. Both men catch the attention of Israel's religious leaders because of their healing. In the case of the man in John 5, Jesus healed him on the Sabbath, and in John 9, Jesus healed on the Sabbath a man considered unhealable because of the assumed sin of his parents or himself that caused him to be punished by being born blind. Both men are hauled before the religious leaders to make explanation. But there, the similarity ends.

The healed paralytic in John 5 is intimidated by the religious leaders and their incessant questioning. Jesus found the man in the temple, and urges him to embrace the Jesus lifestyle. The man returns to the Judean authorities, and tells them it is Jesus who healed him. The man distances himself from Jesus, and gives in to the intimidation of the Jerusalem elite.

Not so the man in John 9. Hauled before the Jewish aristocracy by the people and betrayed by his parents, the man repeatedly tells the story of his healing, proclaims Jesus a prophet (9:17), then pressed by the Pharisees confesses that Jesus is a sinless individual (9:30-32), and then, banned by the Jewish aristocracy from continued participation in Temple worship, ends up owning Jesus as the saving Son of Man and as his Lord (9:35-38).

The man's greatest confession is the moving words, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know – that though I was blind, now I see" (9:25). This man's response cuts to the very heart of the issue underlying both John 5 and John 9 – the issue of tradition versus experience. Unlike the cowardly former paralytic in John 5, this once blind man in essence says to the Pharisees and priests, "I don't care if Jesus healed on the Sabbath. I don't care if your tradition says that a man born blind is being punished for past sins and can never be healed. I don't care about your laws and regulations and liturgies and traditions. What I know is this: I was blind from birth. And now I see!" Experience trumps theology. The man rejects the primary standard upon which the dominant culture maintains its authority – because his lived experience tells him other than that!

So the author of the Gospel of John has intentionally written the two stories of the paralytic man and the man born blind so that he might contrast John 5 and John 9. For the paralytic is totally dominated by the fear of the systems, and thus compromises himself. And the blind man, besides now seeing, is also profoundly free of the intimidating power of the systems.

#### **ACTS 15:1-21; 16:35-40; 19:21—28:31.**

**Acts 15:1-21.** Along with advocacy of the poor, the church is expected by the biblical witness to work for the empowerment of the city's powerless. The church must stand up for the urban poor. The church must work in its city so that economic development can occur, adequate housing be built, and safety and health care be guaranteed for the poor. The church must take seriously its task to "preach good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18).

In the final analysis, however, if the church does not find ways to come alongside the poor to support them as they seek to take charge of their own situations, it has not really done its

job in the city. After all, the people who are best able to assume responsibility for solving a problem are the people who have that problem. That applies as much to the city's poor and powerless as it does to anyone else. The church, therefore, must be involved in working with the people for their own self-determination.

The Bible places much emphasis on the importance of empowerment and self-determination. One such example is found in Acts 15. This event had little to do directly with the poor, brokenhearted, captives and prisoners of the city. But it did have a great deal to do with the future of the Christian Church.

At that time, the church was locked in a fierce debate. Christianity had begun as a Jewish sect, in which one had to be a Jew in order to become a Christian. But under the ministry of Paul and Barnabas, Gentiles were now converting to Christ. Could they do that? Could a Gentile actually become a Christian without converting to Judaism first? Did a Gentile have to first conform to Jewish law (and thus be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses) before he could receive salvation through Christ? This was an issue that had been building a long while in the church, exacerbated by the missionary activities of Paul and Barnabas among Gentiles throughout Asia Minor. These people were becoming Christians without making a prior commitment to Judaism. The issue needed to be clearly and unambiguously resolved. Therefore, the church held its first council in Jerusalem to resolve this issue. To it came the leaders of the emerging Christian movement. Thus, the people having the problem were going to decide together how to solve that problem! This was the practice of self-empowerment!

Both sides gathered – the Judaizers on one side, those who followed Paul and Barnabas on the other. The fathers of the church also gathered, including Simon Peter and James, who was the brother of Jesus. Those who defended the Jewish grounding of the Christian sect first argued their case (15:5). Then, Paul and Barnabas presented their argument that Gentiles don't need to become Jews in order to become Christians (thus, in essence, making Christianity into its own religion distinct from Judaism) (15:12). Peter spoke to the question, taking the side of Paul and Barnabas (15:7-11). Then the whole assembly debated the issue.

What essentially happened was this. Rather than turning to James (the administrative head of the church) or Peter (the spiritual head of the church) to adjudicate the issue, all those concerned with the issue met together and discussed and debated until they came to resolution. The author of the book of Acts refers to it as "much debate".

Finally, the assembly made their decision, and James summarized it for them. He said, "We should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues. (15:19-21)

This is a clear example of working out a negotiated settlement. In essence, Paul and Barnabas won. A Gentile could become a Christian without becoming a Jew first. Therefore, a Gentile need not submit to the ritual of circumcision nor would he/she be expected to obey the

Law of Moses as a pre-condition for salvation. Only receiving Christ as one's savior and lord was necessary for salvation.

But although that might be true, a Gentile shouldn't become an offense to a Jewish Christian, the church fathers adjudicated. Although a Gentile is under grace and not under the Law, he or she should be careful to observe those Jewish laws that would most bring offense to Jews if they were flagrantly ignored. Therefore, don't eat meat that has been sacrificed to pagan idols. Don't follow sexual practices that are offensive to Jews. When with Jews, don't eat meat that is not kosher. Be sensitive to your brother and sister Jewish Christians and treat them with love and kindness.

This was a negotiated settlement. Each side had to give up something in order to be at peace with those Christians with whom they radically disagreed. The Judaizers had to abandon their position that one had to live under the Law before they could live under Grace. The Gentiles had to seek to understand the Judaizers and to observe the Law when in their presence. Both sides were not to give offense to the other. The church had solved a problem that threatened to tear them apart. And they solved it, not by one group pressing its will down upon the other group, but by corporately assuming responsibility for the problem and negotiating a solution acceptable to the church leaders.

I once asked a church historian what was the main lesson he had learned from his study of church history. His response was, "The history of Christianity has been one sorry story after another of Christians making their last-ditch stands in the wrong ditches!" In other words, Christians tend to fight over issues that seem to be terribly important at the time but which are not as systemic to the faith as we think they might be when we do battle. An important biblical strategy that we would do well to follow is to learn how to negotiate on even those issues most important to us. For it is through negotiation that we assume responsibility for our own self-determination and our common empowerment.

**Acts 16:35-40.** To place this story into context, Paul the Apostle and Silas are in Philippi, beginning the building of a church around the household of Lydia, a wealthy merchant. Each day, Paul and Silas go to the town square to proclaim the gospel. On their way each day, they are accosted by a slave woman who can foretell the future and who is being exploited by her owners who charge considerable sums for her to tell people's fortunes. This possessed woman, on seeing Paul and Silas, follows them, crying, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation" (vs. 17). Paul finally becomes annoyed with her and says to her possessing spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her" (vs. 18). And it does!

The owners, deprived of their source of income, are enraged and create a riot. They bring Paul and Silas to the Roman magistrates who strip off their clothes, beat them, and throw them into jail. In doing so, these magistrates have made a grave error. Paul is a Roman citizen, and Roman law provides him due process, protecting him from public humiliation, flogging and jail *until the accusations made against him have been proven in a court of law!* To guarantee that a Roman citizen's rights were not accidentally ignored, Roman law *required* that a magistrate had



to ask *every* person accused of a crime whether or not he was a Roman citizen. But the magistrates assumed Paul isn't a Roman citizen, and therefore they neglect to ask that legally required question.

Paul isn't going to let these magistrates get away with such a serious oversight. Thus, his confrontation of them begins. Paul and Silas are placed into stocks "in the innermost cell" of the Philippian prison. There, they pray and sing hymns. The jailer and the other prisoners listen to them, wondering what kind of mad men these are – and perhaps the jailer thinks, "How foolish these fellows are, praying to their God. Do they think that somehow He will rescue them?"

God does rescue them! "Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened" (16:26).

With the prison destroyed, the guard fears his prisoners have escaped. Roman law required execution for a guard who allowed his prisoners to escape. So the Philippian jailer draws his sword, intent on saving face by committing suicide. But Paul saves him, crying out, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here" (16:28)! The guard, grateful, brings Paul and Silas out of the prison (the Bible doesn't tell us what happened to the other prisoners), takes them to his home, bathes them and tends to their wounds.

Can you imagine the state of mind of this jailer? To say "his mind was blown" would be putting it mildly. In just a few minutes he went from scorn to incredulity to fear to the decision to kill himself to relief and gratitude. No wonder he asks of Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" So "he and his entire family were baptized without delay . . . (and) he had become a believer in God" (16:33b, 34b).

Why is such attention paid in the story to the Philippian jailer? One reason, of course, was to tell of his conversion. But the second reason was to explain what caused the jailer to move from being simply a jailer doing his job to becoming a most forceful advocate for Paul and Silas before the Roman magistrates. The change of role of the jailer is the connecting link in the story between the events of Acts 16:19-23 (before Paul and Silas are thrown into jail) and 16:35-40 (after Paul and Silas are released from jail).

The next day, the magistrates send instructions to the jailer to release Paul and Silas (who are now under house-arrest in the jailer's home). The jailer comes to Paul, bearing the good news. He is not prepared for Paul's reply.

But Paul replied, "They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, *men who are Roman citizens*, and have thrown us in prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves!" (16:37)

The jailer is stunned. He wasn't aware that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. What a severe mistake the magistrates have made – a severe enough mistake that if Paul would bring charges against them, the magistrates could lose their position and authority in the Roman Empire! Now thoroughly on Paul and Silas' side, the jailer goes to the magistrates, tells them

the bad news and insists that the magistrates come to his home and publicly apologize (16:38-39). And the magistrates do it! They “eat humble pie”! They come to Paul and Silas and publicly apologize! And then they nicely ask the two to leave the city. Paul, in essence, says to the magistrates, “We’ll leave when we get around to leaving.” And in no hurry to leave, Paul and Silas go “to Lydia’s house; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed” (16:40).

This story is a story of “in-your-face” confrontation! It is a confrontation of the economic forces of Philippi who would seek to make profit off a possessed slave girl. It is a confrontation of the Philippian jailer and the laws of the state that would make him attempt suicide. But most of all, it is a confrontation of the magistrates of Philippi – the official representatives of the Roman Empire in that city. It is the public humiliation of these magistrates. It is an action that sends a message, loud and clear, to the Roman system throughout the world – “Don’t mess with us Christians! We know the Roman law as well as you. And we will use that law to its fullest extent to protect ourselves and to serve the cause of Christ. So be careful when you deal with Christians. Be very careful!” And that message wasn’t lost on Rome, as the later chapters of Acts, chapters 21-28, clearly demonstrates!

**Acts 19:21-28:31.** Paul the Apostle was an expert at confrontation. This reality is demonstrated both in the skillful use of argument and persuasion used by Paul in his letters, but even more so in the stories of Paul’s dealing with Roman and Jewish authority that is spread across the book of Acts. There is no more significant demonstration of Paul’s capacity and willingness to confront than in a series of events near the close of his ministry -- Acts 19:21-28:31. When these passages are examined as individual stories, then one may not see the sophisticated use of power exercised by Paul. But when one looks at all these stories in sequence – as we are about to do – one cannot but be greatly impressed with that apostle’s skill and boldness in using power in order to advance the Christian cause.

### ***Paul Before Temple Leadership***

The story began at Acts 19:21 with Paul’s decision to go to Jerusalem to report to the mother church on his missionary work, to handle affairs of the church, and to worship in the Temple as a way of demonstrating his continued commitment to Jewish custom and faith. He did worship in this sacred shrine, but his presence in the Temple instigated a riot (21:17-36). Soon, Paul found himself arrested by the Roman tribune, Lysias (21:32-22:21). His arrest by the Romans, as opposed to the Temple police, was fortuitous, because Paul was now under (and would remain under) Roman protection by being in their custody.<sup>33</sup> Lysias, wanting to more clearly understand the charges brought against Paul, had him make a hearing before the Jewish Sanhedrin (22:30). But before he entered the Council Chambers, Paul took action to protect himself (22:25).

“The tribune directed that Paul was to be examined by flogging, to find out the reason for such an outcry against him. But when they had tied him up with thongs, Paul said to the

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<sup>33</sup> Tajra, Harry W., *The Trial of St. Paul: A Juridical Exegesis of the Second Half of the Acts of the Apostles* (Tubingen: JCB Mohr, 1989), p. 68.

centurion, who was standing by, “Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who is uncondemned?” When the centurion heard that, he went to the tribune and said to him, “What are you about to do? This man is a Roman citizen” (22:24-26)!

In this *first confrontive action* by Paul, he informed the Roman arresting officer and through him, the Roman magistrate, that he was a Roman citizen. Why would Paul do this? He would do so because this would change the condition of his imprisonment and trial.

Roman citizens were accorded a different level of jurisprudence than were others. In essence, a person who was not a Roman citizen was *arrested* by the state, which had the objective of disposing of the case as quickly and quietly as possible. On the other hand, a Roman citizen was *protected* by the state from violence against his person, and *guaranteed* due process. He could not be beaten or punished without first being found guilty by an approved court. He was accorded rights of safety and decent living conditions, and he was to be fully accorded due process under Roman law.<sup>34</sup>

In this case, the magistrate had assumed that Paul was not a Roman citizen and was therefore about to deny him full protection and due process – and Paul would have none of it! Through the centurion, Paul informed the magistrate of his status – and this changed the entire way Paul would be both treated and tried. For the remainder of Paul’s conflict with Jewish leadership, it became Rome’s obligation to *protect* rather than to *prosecute* Paul, and this legal protection needed to be both from the wrath of the mob and the machinations of the Jewish priests and religious leaders – all of whom wanted Paul dead!

Having claimed his citizenship and having received the full protection of the Roman state, Paul now came before the Jewish Sanhedrin (Council) for a hearing on his supposed crime. What Paul did in this *second confrontive action* demonstrates his profound knowledge of power.

“Paul called out in the Council, ‘Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead.’ When he said this, a discussion began between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. Then a great clamor arose, and certain scribes of the Pharisees’ group stood up and contended, ‘We find nothing wrong with this man’” (23:6-9a).

In order both to manage the situation and to take away from the Sanhedrin control of the trial, Paul used the tactic of “*divide-and-conquer*”. He perceived that the Sanhedrin was about evenly divided between Sadducees (who denied the resurrection of the body) and Pharisees (who believed in the resurrection). So he declared himself a Pharisee (immediately gaining their sympathy) and raised the issue of resurrection, knowing the dissent it would cause.

But Paul did more than use the tactic of divide-and-conquer. He then did something that was extraordinary. He *redefined the issue*. His presence and persuasiveness was powerful

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<sup>34</sup> For a thorough discussion of the legal rights of a Roman citizen, see Rapske, Brian. *The Book of Acts and Paul in Roman Custody* (Grand Rapids, MI.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), pp. 139-146. Also see Barclay, William. *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), p. 163.

enough that, given the political volatility of the situation, he literally tricked the Sanhedrin into changing the crime of which he was accused!

The crime for which Paul was standing trial was his teaching that Jesus was the Messiah and his taking of that gospel to the Gentiles (21:28; 22:14) – a crime punishable by death in the Jewish court (except for the protection Paul was receiving from Rome). The “crime” Paul told the Sanhedrin of which he was accused was “the hope of the resurrection of the dead”. And because the issue of resurrection was such a combustible issue for the Jewish religious elite, it so thoroughly diverted them from the true purpose of the trial that, in their righteous indignation, they didn’t even realize they had been thoroughly manipulated by Paul. The trial therefore ended in chaos and Rome had to assert its authority once again, rescuing Paul from potential harm.

### ***Paul Before the Roman Magistracy***

Paul uncovered a Jewish plot to assassinate him (23:12-19) and reported the same through his nephew to the Roman tribune. This becomes the *third confrontive* action by Paul. The tribune then acted to protect Paul, moving him in secret to be under the Roman governor’s protection, and giving him a sizeable military escort. This tribune was taking no chances!

At first glance, one’s reaction to this scripture is to think, “How fair the Roman government was, and how committed they were to protect Roman citizens.” That may be true, but that is not fairly stating the case. *Paul was protected because Paul demanded protection.*

To the Romans, Paul was a “pain-in-the-neck”! He seemed to them to be a rabble rouser, whose capacity to agitate the Jewish authorities had been abundantly demonstrated. But, at the same time, he was a Roman citizen, so the Roman authorities and army were obligated to protect him so that he could be judged according to Roman – not Jewish – law. Consequently, the easiest way for them to deal with the Paul issue was to turn a blind eye to any plot by the Jewish leaders to assassinate him; if he were killed, that would solve their problem. But Paul made sure they didn’t take that convenient route.

The tribune was already painfully aware of how well Paul knew Roman law. Now, by exposing this plot to the tribune, Paul was exercising powerfully his legal rights for protection and a fair trial, and the tribune had no alternative but to provide those rights. This is evidenced in the pains that the tribune took to give Paul a military escort (200 soldiers, 70 horsemen, 200 spearmen protecting one prisoner - 23:23) and how carefully he was to word the letter to the Roman governor of Palestine, Felix, indicating how assiduously he had protected Paul and thus fulfilled Roman law (23:26-30).

So the text of Acts tells us, “When they came to Caesarea (the Roman capital of Palestine) and delivered the letter to the governor, they presented Paul also before him . . . . Then (Felix) ordered that he be kept under guard in Herod’s headquarters.” (23:33, 35b) Paul was not placed in prison but under house arrest in the luxurious palace Herod the Great had built for his own enjoyment, which was now being used by Rome as the chief residence and

administration building of the Roman governor. And Paul was accorded a guard – not to keep Paul under arrest, but to protect Paul from attack!<sup>35</sup>

### *Paul Before the Governor*

Chapter 24 of Acts tells of how the high priest of Israel, Ananias, came to Caesarea with “elders and an attorney” to argue the case against Paul. But Paul presented such a strong defense, the governor Felix made no ruling. Then the text reports:

“Then (Felix) ordered the centurion to keep (Paul) in custody, but to let him have some liberty and not to prevent any of his friends from taking care of his needs. Some days later when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and heard him speak concerning faith in Christ Jesus. And as he discussed justice, self-control, and the coming judgment, Felix became frightened and said, “Go away for the present; when I have an opportunity, I will send for you.” At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul, and for that reason he used to send for him very often and converse with him.

After two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus; and since he wanted to grant the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison (24:23-27).

This is the *fourth power action* by Paul. It consisted of the elements of presenting a strong case in his defense, and in building a relationship with Felix. Paul argued his case before Felix and was so convincing that Felix would not bring a verdict against him. But it is also clear from the text that Felix was a compromised individual. He accepted bribes, and he hoped to receive such from Paul. Further, he wanted to remain in favor with the Jewish leaders, so he was not going to set Paul free. Paul did not argue for his freedom, probably because he realized that the assassins were still waiting for him (cf. Acts 25:3, which takes place two years later). So the safest place for Paul was staying under house arrest in the governor’s palace.

But Paul made good use of his informal exile. He enjoyed the liberty of the palace, and he met regularly with church leaders, most likely continuing to give direction to the infant Gentile Christian movement (24:23). But the most important power activity of Paul was his building of a relationship with the Roman governor. The text tells us that Felix “used to send for Paul very often and converse with him” (24:26b). So, presumably, a relationship of trust grew between the two men. And within that relationship, Paul was not afraid to speak truth to the Roman governor (“Paul discussed justice, self-control and the coming judgment”) and to share the gospel with Felix (Paul would “speak concerning faith in Christ Jesus”). (24:24-25)

Thus, what Jesus had predicted 30 years earlier would happen happened. Through Paul, the Church was indeed standing “before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles” (Matt 10:18). Paul was now able to both argue his case and present the gospel before this Roman governor, as well as his successor, along with the king of Galilee, Agrippa --and eventually even Caesar himself. Thus, Paul was able to share “the Way” before some of the most powerful and influential figures in the Roman and Jewish worlds. And they were impressed with his testimony!

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<sup>35</sup> See Acts 21:32-36; 22:22-29; 23:9-10, 12-22.

### ***Paul Appeals to Caesar***

Roman governor Felix now found himself with a dilemma. He knew that he could not find Paul guilty because Paul had broken no Roman law. On the other hand, Paul was a Roman citizen. As such, Felix was responsible for the protection and safety of his prisoner. He knew of the plot to assassinate Paul upon his release, so he could not release him. If he released Paul, and then Paul was killed and it was exposed that Felix knew of the plot, his career as a Roman magistrate would be over!

So Felix was faced with an apparently irresolvable dilemma. What would he do? He did exactly what any government bureaucrat would do. He passed the problem on to his successor, Porcius Festus!

This non-action on Felix' part is the foundation for Paul's *fifth confrontive action*. With his knowledge of Roman law, Paul recognized the dilemma the new governor was in. Paul realized that the only strategy Festus could follow was to keep Paul under permanent house arrest in the governor's palace. Therefore, Paul acted to break the stalemate. He appealed his case to Caesar. This was an intentional, deliberate power action of the apostle.

What did it mean to appeal one's case to Caesar? Any Roman citizen accused of a crime, no matter how poor he might be nor how distant he might live from Rome, had the right to have his case heard directly by Caesar. The case had to be heard by the emperor, as Caesar would sit as the highest court of Rome, acting as both judge and jury.<sup>36</sup>

From my perspective, there were five clear benefits to Paul deciding to appeal his case to Caesar. First, it would resolve the stalemate in which he might otherwise remain for the rest of his life. Second, it would mean that his case would be heard directly by Caesar who had little patience with Jewish religious arguments. Third, it would be held in Rome, which would physically distance Paul from both his accusers and those who would seek his assassination (they would likely not travel to Rome to kill him because if they were caught, they could not be protected by the Sanhedrin and would face certain execution). Fourth, he would be tried exclusively under Roman law, with no concern for sensibility to the Jewish religious establishment; therefore, the case would likely be dismissed.<sup>37</sup> And finally, appealing to Caesar meant that the emperor himself was going to hear a proclamation of the gospel by Paul.

It is important to realize that Paul's decision to appeal his case to Caesar was not a sudden whim on his part. It was a carefully calculated and highly intentional act in which Paul was exercising the power vested in him as a Roman citizen. It was therefore a very deliberate act of power!

“You have appealed to the emperor; to the emperor you will go”, Festus replied (25:12)!

### ***Paul Before Governor and King***

<sup>36</sup> Tajra, Harry W., *op. cit.*, pp. 113, 144-147.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

Of course, going to the emperor did not immediately happen. The governor had to wait until the next Roman sailing vessel, suitable for carrying both Paul as a passenger and his Roman guards, would be available. Passage at Roman expense had to be booked on that vessel. It could sail only in that season when sailing was safe, because the personal safety of Paul was the governor's responsibility until Paul reached Rome. So there was a passage of some weeks, and possibly of some months before Paul set sail for Rome.

During the interim, Paul exercises his *sixth confrontive action*.

“After several days had passed, King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to welcome Festus. Since they were staying there several days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, “There is a man here who was left in prison by Felix. When I was in Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews informed me about him and asked for a sentence against him. I told them that it was not the custom of the Romans to hand over anyone before the accused had met the accusers face to face and had been given an opportunity to make a defense against the charge. So when they met here, I lost no time, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought. When the accusers stood up, they did not charge him with any of the crimes that I was expecting. Instead, they had certain points of disagreement with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, but whom Paul asserted to be alive. Since I was at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wished to go to Jerusalem and be tried there on these charges. But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of his Imperial Majesty, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to the emperor.” Agrippa said to Festus, “I would like to hear the man myself.” “Tomorrow,” he said, “you will hear him” (25:13-22).

While in house arrest at the governor's palace, Paul was invited to present his case to King Agrippa – not for Agrippa to adjudicate (the emperor would be responsible for doing that) but for the purpose of enabling Festus to present clearly in writing to the emperor the crime of which Paul was accused and the circumstances surrounding the supposed crime. Festus wanted Agrippa's advice because the governor neither understood nor was sensitive to the nuances of Jewish religious law, and Agrippa was. At the same time, Agrippa was no religious elite, concerned with protecting that interest at all costs. Because he thoroughly understood both Roman and Jewish law, he was the ideal person to assist Festus in writing the brief for the emperor so that it was both accurate and captured the nuances of the situation.

Who was King Agrippa? Marcus Julius Agrippa (A.D. 27 – *ca.* 100) was the son of Agrippa I and great-grandson of Herod the Great. He was the king of Perea and those portions of Galilee not directly governed by Rome and also had the responsibility of appointing the Jewish high priest. Agrippa II was appointed to this responsibility by Rome and was directly accountable to them (whenever possible, Rome ruled conquered provinces through a local Roman-appointed king, as this would tend to make the populace more willing to accept the Roman suzerainty). Agrippa II was educated in Rome, was extremely knowledgeable about Roman law, and was deeply committed to the emperor. But he also understood the Jews, was well versed in their law, respected their religious practices (but not their moral requirements – he

was likely in an incestuous relationship with his sister) and would intervene on behalf of the Jews.<sup>38</sup>

Although Agrippa could not adjudicate the case, there was ample reason for Paul to appear before him to present it. The first reason was that, given Agrippa's understanding of Jewish law and scripture, Paul could not only make a defense but could also present clearly the claims of Christ to the king. Second, it would not hurt his case to have Agrippa on his side, especially if the emperor would seek the king's counsel. Finally, although Agrippa had no authority to release Paul, there was likely no one better positioned than he to hear Paul's case – both in helping to form the case for the emperor's ears and to be an advocate for Paul (26:32). So it was in Paul's self-interest to make his case before Agrippa II.

The defense Paul made before Agrippa and Festus was probably the most powerful apologia Paul made in scripture (26:1-29). It was brilliant in its simplicity. He began by stating his argument: “Now I stand on trial on account of my hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors, a promise that our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship day and night. It is for this hope, your Excellency, that I am accused by Jews! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?” (26:6-8)

Paul then told his story. He first shared with Agrippa his former status in the Jewish community (26:4-8), making a point of his having been a Pharisee (Agrippa was particularly supportive of the Pharisee movement, as over against the priestly and Sadducean movements). He then moved on to tell how he had persecuted the emerging Christian movement (26:9-11). He continued with the story of his conversion and of his call to ministry to the Gentiles. Finally, he concluded with the stirring words, “After that, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea and also to the Gentiles that they should repent and turn to God.” (26:19-20), and then noted that the Jewish ecclesiastical leaders took offense at his message. “So I stand here, testifying to both small and great, *saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place*: that the Messiah must suffer, and that by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles” (26:22-23, italics mine).

Essentially, the argument Paul was presenting was that both the Hebrew Law (“Moses”) and the Hebrew prophets predicted the coming of a Messiah who would die for the sins of the nation, would be raised again, and that this “gospel” would be proclaimed to Jew and Gentile alike. Paul was simply proclaiming that what was predicted had come true in Jesus of Nazareth. And it was for that proclamation of that which all Jews realize is true that the Jewish ecclesiastical aristocracy was trying to get Paul killed!

At this point, Festus interrupted Paul's defense, in essence saying, “This is the craziest story I've ever heard!” But Paul rebutted Festus and challenged Agrippa. “King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe” (26:27)! He was, in essence, saying to Agrippa, “The perspective of Festus that I am crazy is exactly what we Jews would expect out of

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<sup>38</sup> Munck, Johannes. *The Acts of the Apostles* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 237-238, 240, 245; Sandmel, S., “Herod Agrippa II” in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. E-J, edited by George A. Buttrick (NY: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 592.



an uninformed Gentile. But you know better, don't you, King Agrippa? You know the prophets. You know what they have predicted both about the coming of the Messiah and his resurrection. And you know, in your heart of hearts, that what I am telling you is true!"

Agrippa's response to Paul's challenge was significant. He replied, "Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?" (26:28, NRSV) or "You almost persuade me to become a Christian" (NKJV). Which did King Agrippa say? Was he courteously evading the challenge by saying "You will have to present much more evidence than this argument if you are going to win me to your Christ"? Or was he saying, "I am almost persuaded to become a Christian"? We do not know Agrippa's intention in these words. The Greek itself is ambiguous; it literally says, "In a little, you are persuading me to make a Christian." But whether Agrippa's response was an evasion or nearly a confession of faith, it was a significant response. Paul had struck close to home. Agrippa had been moved. And this messenger from God had radically disrupted the neat arrangements into which Agrippa had ordered his life.

Paul had the last word. "Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today (i.e., Festus) might become such as I am – except for these chains" (26:29)!

In this, the sixth power action of this section of Acts, Paul had used his defense as an opportunity to share the gospel with the two highest government officials in Palestine – the king of Galilee/Perea and the Roman governor. And in that sharing, he had shaken both of them to their respective cores – agitating the governor and provoking the king. Most of all, from the standpoint of power dynamics, Paul had gained an important ally in King Agrippa, because it would be likely that Caesar, uninformed on Jewish law, would turn to his surrogate king in Palestine for enlightenment! The final words of Agrippa capture his commitment to the innocence of Paul: "This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment. This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to the emperor!" (26:31-32)

### ***Going to Caesar***

Paul's *seventh power action* is unlike the six previous actions, in that it does not occur in a single place and does not deal directly with his trial or imprisonment.

"When it was decided that we were to sail for Italy, they transferred Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort, named Julius. Embarking on a ship of Adramyttium that was about to set sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea" (27:1-2).

Acts 27 is the account of Paul's trip to Rome where Caesar was to hear his case. It was a rough journey. By the time that the Festus administration had completed arrangements for Paul's trip to Rome, the sailing season was nearly over and the inclement weather of winter was fast approaching. The Acts text charts their voyage across the Mediterranean, stopping at several islands to change ships (27:2-8). At one island with a poor harbor, Paul could see how rapidly the stormy weather was closing in upon them and advised the ship's captain and the centurion to winter there (27:9-12). They chose to put forth to a more secure harbor near Crete, ran into a

vicious storm, and the ship was in danger of sinking (27:13-20). Paul took charge of the situation, told them the ship would run aground, but instructed them to stay together so that all could be saved (27: 21-26). It came about as he had predicted, with the ship running aground and breaking up, but all 277 passengers and crew safely washed ashore (27:27-44).

What gave Paul such courage and presence of mind in the midst of such danger and chaos? Well, in reading both the book of Acts and Paul's epistles, one does not get the impression of a frightened or easily intimidated individual. But Luke reports something far more decisive than that.

“Paul stood up among them and said, “Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and thereby avoided this damage and loss. I urge you now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For last night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before the emperor and indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you.’ So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we will have to run aground on some island” (27:21-26).

“There stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul!’” Here was the source of Paul's remarkable determination, power and courage. It was not simply that he was a very determined and single-minded man. It was that he was a *called* man. He saw himself as chosen by God, adopted as God's child through Christ, redeemed, forgiven, given the knowledge of God's will for humanity and marked with the power of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:3-13). And he was thus called and chosen so that he might “bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ . . . so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph. 3:8b, 10) – even Caesar, himself! So not even the worst storm at sea could discourage Paul. Assured and buoyed by the angel's visit, Paul took over the leadership of the sinking ship and guided its people into safe harbor.

Acts 28 found the luckless shipwrecks stranded upon the island of Malta. The former passengers and crew tried to warm themselves around a fire to ward off the bitter cold and rain, as Paul and others gathered firewood. Suddenly a highly venomous viper came out of the wood and struck Paul (28:1-4). “They were expecting him to swell up or drop dead, but after they had waited a long time and saw that nothing unusual had happened to him, they changed their minds and began to say he was a god” (28:6),

The shipwrecks were well received by the residents of the local town, where they wintered for three months. Paul was given temporary hospitality at the home of the “leading man of the island”, Publius, where he healed his ill father. This, in turn, opened a healing and teaching ministry for Paul in that village (28:7-9). Finally, when spring returned, Paul and the passengers set sail, continuing to Rome, with the town residents “bestow(ing) many honors on us, and when we were about to sail, they put on board all the provisions we needed” (28:10),

In doing a power analysis of Acts 27:1-28:10, one has to ask the question, “Who was the prisoner and who was in charge?” Paul came on board the ship departing from Palestine as a

prisoner of the Roman government. But it is a testimony to his powerful and decisive personality that he soon assumed the leadership of both passengers and crew. First ignored by the Roman officer and the ship's captain, he became the one actually giving the orders as the ship foundered. It was Paul who prepared both crew and passengers for their shipwreck, including instructions as to what they were to do when the ship went down. It was Paul who gathered the people around the fire built by the townspeople of Malta and was busy gathering wood when he was bitten by the snake. It was Paul (and not the others) who was invited into the chief person's house. It was Paul who conducted ministry in the town. The prisoner had become the leader of both the passengers and crew, apparently even obeyed by the Roman guard escorting him to Rome!

### ***Paul Conquers Rome***

The *eighth power action* now concludes the book of Acts. Paul arrived in Rome and settled there, waiting for his trial before Caesar (28:11-31).

“Three months later we set sail on a ship that had wintered at the island, an Alexandrian ship with the Twin Brothers as its figurehead. We put in at Syracuse and stayed there for three days; then we weighed anchor and came to Rhegium. After one day there a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli (RCL note: Puteoli was the seaport for Rome; the rest of the journey would be made on foot). There we found believers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome! The believers from there, when they heard of us, came as far as the forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. When we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him” (Acts 28:11-16).

Paul – and the Christian Gospel – staged a triumphant procession into Rome! This was what the author of Acts wanted to clearly communicate. Paul did not enter Rome like a prisoner, in chains and to the jeers of the crowd. Paul strode into the city, just as would the emperor or a conquering general of Rome. He was followed by an entourage of Christians who escorted him into the city with shouts of triumph and in joy. The gospel had come to conquer Rome!

As was always Paul's custom, he shared the gospel with the Jewish Diaspora in Rome. They rejected his message and he declared that he would continue in bringing the gospel, not to the Jews but to the Gentiles. The book of Acts then concludes, “(Paul) lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (28:30-31).

Paul was under house arrest, awaiting trial before the emperor. But think how he used the power of his Roman citizenship both to protect his life and to advance the cause of Christ. The Roman government – and not the church nor Paul -- had paid for his travel to Rome. Now, under house arrest, he was under Roman guard and could not leave the house or gardens, but anyone he wished to see could have free access to him. There, under Roman protection, Paul provided direction to the Roman Church, leadership to the empire-wide effort to reach the Roman Empire with the gospel, wrote many of his letters that have now become epistles of the

New Testament, and both expanded and strengthened the Church for the Roman persecution that would eventually come.<sup>39</sup>

Tradition tells us, as well, that Paul built relationships with those members of the Praetorian Guard (the elite corps responsible for the protection of the emperor, his household and prisoners) that protected him. Several of those soldiers became converted to Christ, so that a Christian church was formed and began meeting in their barracks (which were in Caesar's palace).<sup>40</sup> Thus, there was a worshipping Christian congregation in Caesar's own household. Therefore, Paul took full advantage of his imprisonment to build a powerful church across the Roman Empire while under the protection and unwitting support of Rome!

Did Paul know how to use power to protect himself, advance the gospel, and position the Church to profoundly impact both the present and the future of Rome? Oh, yes!<sup>41</sup>

## ROMANS 7:7-8:4

**Romans 7:7-8:4.** The most comprehensive statement found in scripture describing the breadth of salvation is Romans 7:7-8:4. But the key to comprehending Paul's description of salvation is first to understand what he means by "the Law".

In the book of Romans, Paul presents his trilogy of the forces that separate humanity from God. That trilogy is sin, death and the Law. His definitions of sin and death are obvious, but what does Paul mean by the "Law"? Obviously, he does not mean Roman law, nor does he simply mean the Torah and its accompanying traditions, because his description of the Law is too comprehensive to simply mean the written Jewish law.

What Paul meant by the "Law" is the religious, cultural, political and economic mosaic of rules and regulations that ordered all of life throughout worldwide Judaism. It includes the essential values by which Jewish life is to be lived, the structures by which those values are to be enacted into everyday life, and the offices (e.g. high priest, Levitical priesthood, scribes) and parties (the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Sanhedrin) – or, in other words, the people by which these values and structures are to be implemented throughout worldwide Jewry. In other words, by the very definition of a system as consisting of values, structures and people,<sup>42</sup> what Paul means by "the Law" is the primary system of worldwide Judaism! Understanding Paul's definition of "the Law" is extremely strategic to our understanding of the book of Romans, and of Paul's message contained therein.

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<sup>39</sup> Rapske, Brian, *op. cit.*, pp. 177-183.

<sup>40</sup> Barclay, William, *op. cit.*, p. 193

<sup>41</sup> Much of this material on Paul is taken from a paper written by Robert Linthicum that was published as chapter 25, "The Apostle Paul's Acts of Power" in the book, Gallagher, Robert I and Paul Hertig, *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), pp. 297-312.

<sup>42</sup> The term, "system" is used to describe an organized body of people gathered together around three components: *values* that are held in common by the people and groups living under that system, *structures* that institutionalize those values, enabling those values to be practiced by the people living in that system and, finally, *individuals* who manage and operate those institutions. All three components must exist for a system to be a system.

### *Why Humans Can't Build Consistently Good Systems*

In Romans 7:7-13, Paul presents his perspective as to why human beings can't make and maintain consistently good systems – or, in other words, why humans can't build the shalom community by themselves. In his letter to the Roman Church, Paul had earlier contended that the Christian is free from the demands of the Law (i.e., the “system” of worldwide Judaism), Sin and Death, because we have been set free by the sacrifice of Christ. Now it is incumbent upon Paul to support that argument. To do so, the apostle writes, “What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might become sinful beyond measure” (Romans 7:7, 13).

In order to understand the depth of what Paul is saying here, we must keep in mind that every reference by Paul to the “Law” is a reference to an all-encompassing, controlling “structure of systems” – what St. Paul called the “Principalities and Powers”. Keeping in mind that what Paul is referring to when he speaks of the “Law” is what we mean today by the systems of a society, consider what the apostle is actually saying here.

When there were no “systems” ordering life (i.e., the Garden of Eden), humanity was “alive” in God. But when the systems of Israel (and, by inference, all nations and cities) came into existence, “sin” (or the lust for power, wealth or control) sprang to life and we spiritually died. It was not because the systems are evil that society became corrupt. To the contrary, the need to create political, economic and religious systems was placed in humanity by God in order to give structure, order and direction to human society. But the very existence of such systems killed – and still kills – humanity. The very existence of that which we need to focus us, give meaning to life and which is consequently good for us, leads inevitably to the decay and destruction both of our society and of ourselves. And here is the reason that is true.

The very nature of our humanity will inevitably seek to take advantage of any system that structures our lives. Our very proclivity as human beings towards protecting our own interests and taking advantage of any weakness in our competitors – that is, our very proclivity toward “sinfulness” and “lawlessness” – will inevitably destroy even the best systems we might invent. By our very nature as sinful (that is, self-serving) creatures, we corrupt the very systems we create to structure life.

A good example of this proclivity in us can be seen in the common phenomena of a pastor who has committed himself to the ministry of a single congregation for much of his career. He or she may build that church into a strong and large congregation from a small and weak one. But then that pastor can't let go. She or he begins hurting people, using every means at his or her disposal to maintain control and essentially identifying him or herself with that church. And the church begins to suffer. It stops growing and moves into stasis. And the lay leadership becomes increasingly critical of the methods and tactics of the pastor. As they do, that pastor becomes even less flexible, increasingly dictatorial and increasingly ineffective. So it is that this pastor ends up unintentionally tearing down and even destroying that church and ministry (that is, that system) that he has spent decades building.

So those systems, created to bring order to life, bring us “death” instead. That is why human beings can never create a good society! We are, in essence, our own worst enemy.

### ***Why We Are Our Own Worst Enemy***

“I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death” (7:15b, 24)? In these words, Paul speaks for “Everyman”, for we cannot help but recognize ourselves in his admission of his own sinfulness. Paul recognizes the importance of the systems for ordering life, and acknowledges they have great capacity for social good. But he tells us in Romans 7:14-24, there is something demonic in him – and in fact, in every one of us – that always wants to “beat the system”, to use the system for one’s own ends. That attitude, acted out over and over again by each person, century after century, person after person after person, family after family after family, organization after organization after organization, system after system corrupts both one’s self and the systems we create and maintain.

A simple experience which all of us have had illustrates Paul’s point. Either by accident or by intent, you drive through a red light. What do you instinctively do, once you realize that you have broken the law? You look in the rear-view mirror! Why? In order to check whether a police car is pursuing you. And if you see no pursuing police, if you see no flashing police light or hear no police siren, how do you feel? Sorry? Crestfallen for having broken the law? In deep remorse? Come on – be honest. What you feel is exactly what I feel – exaltation! I’ve broken the law – *and I’ve gotten away with it! I’ve beaten the system!!!*

The point Paul is making is this. The enemy is not, in the final analysis, the systems themselves. The enemy is not simply “them” – the maintainers and creators of the systems. The enemy is not simply “those politicians”, the “owners of the market”, the “religious or academic elite”. *The enemy is us!*

If we do not see this, then we will operate out of a dichotomy that divides the world into “good guys” and “bad guys”. We will see other institutions and their people as being evil and ourselves as being good. And the reason why we will do that is because we will be judging others by their actions while judging ourselves by our intentions!

If, on the other hand, we recognize the great capacity for evil that lies within ourselves, the more realistic we will be in understanding the world. It is imperative for us as Christians, Paul is essentially saying in this passage, to understand that the systems are not evil and we are good, but that evil permeates each of us, that evil compels all of us to attempt to beat the very systems we create, and that consequently we destroy everything we touch even when our intentions are good and honorable.

One percent of the population of the United States owns 40% of the wealth, and 5% of the population owns 60% of the wealth of this nation.<sup>43</sup> In fact, the world’s *three richest*

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<sup>43</sup> The Federal Reserve Survey of Consumer Finances as reported by Edward Wolff, *Shifting Fortunes: The Perils of the Growing American Wealth Gap* (United for a Fair Economy, 1999).

*individuals* have as much wealth as the world's 43 poorest countries combined!<sup>44</sup> Yet all the hungry, sick, dying people of the world could be fed, adequately housed, clothed and given adequate health care if these three individuals or that 1% of America's richest families would contribute only 5% of their annual income.<sup>45</sup> And our reaction to such news is to ask, "What's the matter with these people? Why do they have to be so greedy? What kind of human beings are they, anyway?"

What kind of human beings are they? They are human beings just like us. The only difference between the powerful and us is that we have lacked their opportunity. If we were worth a billion dollars, our concern would be to protect it. If we were president of the United States, we would be concerned about preserving and exercising our power. Given a reversal of roles, we would likely act in situations comparable to the way the powerful and wealthy act to preserve our power, accumulate wealth and seek to control the thinking and obedience of our "subjects".

The enemy is not "them"; the enemy is "us". It is our own deeply ingrained and perfidious nature that will keep on corrupting every system that we create or in which we participate! Because of our own need to use to our own advantage every system in which we find ourselves – and because every single human being who is also in that system is seeking to use it in every way that he can for his advantage – we will destroy every structure, every institution that we touch – even when our intentions are good!

So the inevitable conflict in the human/societal condition, according to Paul, comes down to this: "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." What hope is there, then, for me, for my family, for my community, for my church, for my city, for my nation, for the world – *if even I am the enemy?*

***The Solution: "Thanks Be to God for Jesus Christ our Lord!"***

"Thanks be to God for Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 7:25)! Paul concludes that only Jesus can release us as individuals, can release the systems we create, and can release all of the created order from the powers of Sin, Death and the Law. Salvation does not lie in our political designs, our economic systems, even in the religion in which we might believe. Salvation does not lie in any person – whether ourselves or a great leader, since both that leader and we who follow him will be corrupted by our own self-service. It is only by the intervention of God in our political, economic and religious systems and into our individual lives that we can be released from our own perfidious nature to corrupt everything we touch. And that intervention has already happened through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But how has Christ's death and resurrection enabled both us and the systems that we create to be delivered from the powers of "Sin, Death and the Law"? Here Paul's theology reaches its most profound level in an analysis far more sophisticated than the writing of any other New Testament author.

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<sup>44</sup> U.S. News and World report, September 26, 2000 issue.

<sup>45</sup> As compiled from the United Nations Development Report of 1997 and the World Health Organization's annual report of 1998.

“God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us” (Rom. 8:3-4a). The “systems” of God – that is, the “law (or systems) of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus” – is able to liberate us from the systems ordering the world. God has done what neither our systems nor we can do, because we so pervasively corrupt and demonize every system in which we find ourselves.

It is through the intervention of Jesus’ death that God has fulfilled all the obligations of all systems. That is, it was only Jesus who as God in the flesh would not and did not corrupt every system in which he was placed, because he was the only human being never to proceed from self-service, manipulation or control. And because he could live sinless before the systems, and to do so in our stead, all the demands our systems place upon us, all the demands the specter of death and the very corruptibility of our own personalities make upon us – have been met and satisfied in Christ!

In his death, Christ met all the conditions of the law (the systems); he faced the worst of death for us at the hands of the political, economic and religious systems of Israel and of Rome. He plunged the depth of human corruption *in our stead and in the systems’ stead!*

This is what the Apostles Creed means by that mysterious teaching, “he descended into hell”. Jesus descended in his death into the hell of the worst that humanity and human society could throw at him. He plunged the greatest depths of human corruption. He has received all that such corruption could throw at any human being, not just the corruptions of individuals or of groups, but of the systems themselves. In the most profound act of redemption and forgiveness, Paul tells us, Christ had plunged the very depths, not only of our sin but also of the systems, because God wants transformed systems, redeemed creation. In that plunge, Jesus took upon himself all the evil – personal, corporate and systemic evil – could ever do, and thus he liberated us *and our systems* from the necessity of evil’s complex grasp. We are redeemed. And the systems have also been set free by the sacrificial death of Christ – if they will just receive the redemptive work he has done for them.

It is in that light of what Christ has done for us and our systems that we can then join with him in working to bring the world’s systems in fact as well as in spirit and in truth under the authority and control of God. Doing that, on our part, recaptures for all humanity the “shalom community”. Jesus has made it possible. That is why he died, according to St. Paul.

## **COLOSSIANS 2:13-15**

**Colossians 2:13-15** helps us to understand the blindness of the city or nation. The scripture that is most instructive to us in such an analysis is not one that uses the imagery of blindness, but rather one that reflects upon the church’s interaction with the principalities and powers of city or empire. The New International Version of the Bible is a far superior translation of Colossians 2:13-15 than is the NRSV, which is our standard text in this lectionary study. The NIV translates St. Paul as writing:



“When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”

In this passage, Paul gives us insight into the unique work of the church in the city and empire by showing us the unique work of Christ. The work Christ did for us was to free us from the power and influence of the “powers and authorities”. He “disarmed” and “made a public spectacle” of them.

The extremely vivid image Paul is using here, of course, is the triumphal procession. When a Roman general conquered an enemy, he would often make a triumphal procession into Rome, marching through the city streets not only his conquering army, but his foe’s defeated troops, the hostages and booty taken and, finally, the vanquished general or king. It was, for any Roman general, the supreme apex of his career when he was granted the right to a triumphal procession.

Thus Paul is describing Jesus as the conquering general who parades the defeated and vanquished principalities and powers through the city they once sought to rule. They are thus made into a public spectacle, where the citizens of that city heap abuse and scorn upon them!

How did Christ defeat the principalities and powers of city and empire? Paul tells us that Christ “canceled the written code” (i.e., the system or mosaic of religious, cultural, political and economic rules and regulations which ordered all life throughout both Judaism and the Roman Empire).<sup>46</sup> He forgave us our sins, freed us from the authority of the city’s and empire’s systems over our lives, and granted us freedom in Christ. By such redemptive action, the power of the systems and their principalities (both earthly and demonic) has been broken, both over the church and over all society.

It is particularly intriguing to note the variety of words used by translators to seek to capture what Paul believed Christ did to “the written code”. In his death, Christ “overrode” the systems; he “did away” and “set aside” the systems; he “canceled” and “took it out of the way”.<sup>47</sup> The Greek word means “rubbing out” the record of a debt; it signifies the actual act of canceling the debtor’s note. Paul suggests that Christ took that note of indebtedness held against us, nailed it up on the cross for all to see that it had been forgiven, and then erased any record that there had been any indebtedness in the first place.

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<sup>46</sup> It is debated among scholars whether Paul is referring solely to the Jewish legal and regulatory system or whether he is making reference to the entire “written code” that regulated all life – both Jewish and Gentile – in the Roman Empire. I have taken it to mean the latter, but holding the former would not detract in any way from the argument I present regarding this Scripture passage.

<sup>47</sup> Respectively, “overrode” (Jerusalem Bible), “did away” (Today’s English Version), “set aside” (Revised Standard Version and New English Bible), “canceled” (New International Version), “took it out of the way” (Moffat).

In other words, Paul is telling the Colossian Christians that the debt which Roman society and the Jewish religion had always told them they owed actually did not exist! It had been erased by Christ! All along, the Christians had been obeying a lie! They went on believing that they were under the authority of Roman law and the Jewish religious system, and they never were because ever since Christ died for them, they were freed from the power of the law. All these commands and teachings were man-made rules and regulations, but everyone, including the Christians, had accepted them as absolute truth.

In the light of the awareness that we have been victims of the lie, Paul asks, what should be our response? Well, “since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules” (Col. 2:20)? Why do you Christians go on believing the lies and submitting to the authority of those lies? Why don’t you start living your lives as those freed from the world’s regulations, responsible only to Christ? Why don’t you start practicing the truth in your relationships with each other, in the social order, and with all humanity? And why don’t you start exposing the lies by which the principalities and powers hold humanity in bondage? We see that Paul wrote the remainder of Colossians 2 and then 3:1-9 to illustrate how Christians, redeemed from the power of the principalities, continue to live captive to that power because they do not live out freedom in Christ. Chapter 3 shows what life would be like if Christians lived under the authority of heaven rather than under the domination of the Roman and Jewish systems and their principalities.

By exposing the systems and the principalities for what they actually are – the means to control humans and drag them down to hell – Christ has created the means for the liberation of the city and nation, and all its inhabitants!

This Scripture thus gives us clear insight into a portion of the primary vocation of the church in the world. The mission of the church is to proclaim, “Once I was blind” (John 9:25a). It is to confess that both it and all who now call themselves Christians were once seduced by the tempting and intimidating lies of the city and the world. And it is to challenge those who are outside the church to perceive how both they and the structures they have created to order life have also been seduced by those same controlling lies.

But the mission of the church is also to proclaim, “But now I see” (John 9:25b). The primary responsibility of the church is to enable the systems and structures and the people so deeply influenced and even intimidated by those systems to see their city from an entirely different perspective. And then, once seeing, the church is to help them to act according to that new sight. People and systems, no longer blinded, can see through the lies Satan tells them about their city, nation and world. They are then able to see themselves as children of God and their city as the city of God; they are then able to act consistently on what they see.<sup>48</sup>

Let’s look briefly at how the church faithfully sought to expose the lie of the systems, the principalities and powers during the church’s first three centuries of life.

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<sup>48</sup> See the commentaries in the Linthicum lectionary ([www.rclinthicum.org](http://www.rclinthicum.org)) on Ephesians 3:8-12, Jeremiah 38:17-23, and Isaiah 37:6-20 for a further development of this second half of the mission of the church: to “see”.

*The lie of first-century Judaism* was that by obedience to the Law, people would find life. Those obedient to the Law could not see that their very obedience to it was killing them, because they could not accept how their sinful nature would corrupt the system upon which they would depend for life (see Romans 7:7-8:4). So those in the first-century cities of the Roman Empire who depended upon the Jewish Law to bring them life were actually being led into spiritual death by the principalities and powers.

There were significant benefits in following the Law. If there were not, no one would have practiced it. The Law of Jesus' and Paul's times presented to people a fair, understandable, and predictable universe. Everything about life had been neatly set down in the Law, and thus in a chaotic, damaging world, life for obedient Jews became quite predictable and comforting. The Law may have been terribly limiting, but limits give people the sense of boundaries and security.

How did the church expose the controlling, dominating lie of the Law? It did it through the theology of the Cross and Resurrection. It is asserted that the Law creates a fair, understandable, and predictable universe, administered by good and fair men. Then how is Christ's death explained? A man deeply loved by the people, considered a prophet by many of them, a man who had done nothing but good, healing the sick, raising the dead, feeding the hungry, bringing hope to the poor – this man was put to death by the very “good and fair” men who administered the Law, doing so through the very dictates of the Law. That which had been created to maintain a fair, understandable, and predictable existence for all had, in the hands of threatened men, become unjust, insane, and manipulative – a tool for doing evil rather than accomplishing good. And the resurrection of Jesus from the dead exposed to all that the Law, created to be just and reasonable, had instead become irredeemably evil, for the Resurrection witnessed to the fact that it was the Law that had put to death him who was indeed the Christ, the way of salvation for the world.

*The lie of Rome* was that it held ultimate power and authority over all people. Rome convinced the then-known world that it held the power of life and death over all people and all nations. The *Pax Romana* was a peace enforced at the point of a spear. No state could conquer Rome (Hannibal discovered that), and Rome could sweep through any nation that might offer resistance to its marching legions (innumerable triumphal processions witnessed to that). Rebellion, whether of slaves, subjects, or states, was futile. The presence of executing crosses throughout the empire was constant, mute testimony to what awaited anyone who would dare challenge or try to escape the authority of Rome. Rome was the author of life and death!

There were distinct benefits to living under such tyranny, for Rome acted as a benevolent despot. The world did know peace under the *Pax Romana* for more centuries than it had experienced before or since. The nations and peoples of the Mediterranean world knew more prosperity, a higher standard of living, and a level of urbanization that it would take nearly another two thousand years to equal. Life was enhanced by the ease of transportation over Roman roads and over seas free of pirates, communications which could travel with amazing speed from one end of the empire to the other, and a predictable legal system. Yes, there were many apparent rewards for cooperating with such a “beneficent” system. But cooperation came at the price of freedom, justice and integrity.

The church exposed the lie of Rome's invincible power. This is the only explanation that truly makes sense out of Rome's episodic persecution of the church for two centuries. Those emperors who scorned and attacked the church rightly perceived that the greatest enemy Rome faced was not the Huns or Visigoths, but the Christians. This was so because the Christians witnessed constantly, in word and deed and life, that it was their God and not Rome who truly possessed the power of life and death.

In the hands of the Christians, the interpretation of the death of Jesus Christ at the hands of Rome constantly proclaimed the limits as well as the abuses of Roman power. Christ could face the most brutal death and punishment that Roman "justice" could devise. Yet he could liberate millions through that death.

The Resurrection was perhaps more of an offense to the Romans than to the Jews. It was the constant symbol to Rome of a rebellion they could not stop! Rome could kill Jesus. But they could not keep Jesus dead! The empty cross in every worship site was a constant testimony to the Empire and the people alike that Rome's supposed power over life and death was a fiction. The Christians had a far greater power than Rome's capacity to put them to death. Christ had risen from the dead; Christ lives! And because he lives, all those who follow him in death will also live. Rome does not control life and death. Christ does! In this way it would be the martyrs of Christ, and not the soldiers of Attila, who would break the power of Rome!

*And today?* What are the lies that our nation's systems and their principalities and powers tell us today? What is the task of the church – the people of God who have experienced Christ's crucified and resurrected power – in dealing with these lies at the core of our society? How is the Church those who see, and lead the world out of its blind dependence to its principalities and power, so that the world can see, as well?

## **II JOHN 1:5-6**

**II John 1:5-6** states something quite unexpected. The author write, "But now, dear lady, I ask you, not as though I am writing a new commandment, but one we have had from the beginning, 'Let us love one another'. And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments. This is the commandment just as you have heard it from the beginning; you must walk in it" (1:5-6).

One doesn't normally think of love as "walking according to Christ's commandments". Rather, we most often think of love as deeply caring for a person. But here, John defines love as obedience to God – and therefore, to Christ. Love is to be "a long obedience in the same direction". For out of obedience to the call of Christ upon our lives comes faithfulness and dependability – the exact opposite of being a "flash-in-the-pan" or an enthusiastic but shallow person.

**REVELATION 1:9-2:7; 2:8-11; 2:12-17; 2:18-29; 3:1-6; 3:7-13; 3:14-22; 11:15-19; 17:1-19:10**

**Revelation 1:9-2:7.** When one thinks of the cities in the book of Revelation, one immediately identifies two of them – the New Jerusalem “coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (21:1-22:21) and Babylon the Great (17:1-19:10). But the New Jerusalem and Babylon the Great are not the only cities that appear in the book of Revelation. Seven other cities figure prominently in that Apocalypse. These are the churches in the seven dominate cities of Asia Minor. Those cities are not included by accident in this book that foretells the future. They are included because their churches are being offered the hope of God’s eventual triumph even as they are being urged to remain faithful in their everyday practice of the Gospel.

Both the audiences and the purpose of the book of Revelation are given in Revelation 1:9-11:

“I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance; was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, ‘Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.’”

John quickly affirms his relationship with his readers. “I (am) your brother”. He is their brother because they are all one in Christ, and it is their common salvation through Christ that unites them and upon which their fraternal relationship is built. John identifies with them in the persecution and difficulties under which they are all living (v. 9). He has shared in their sufferings, in their kingdom of persecution, and he has endured with them. So he is not only brother with them in Christ, but companion with them in their sufferings. It is out of their common fraternal relationship and their unity in persecution that John brings to them a word from the Lord.

It is important to recognize that the book of Revelation was a letter! It was not a book meant for the church at large, but instead was a letter written to the seven churches in the strategic cities of Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. It is a vision meant for God’s people in seven pivotal cities. It is an urban vision for urban churches and urban Christians – John’s brothers and sisters.

The message that John presents to them is a message of hope and encouragement in the midst of their persecution and suffering at the hand of Rome. The book of Revelation cannot be appreciated except as a letter of instruction and encouragement to urban churches regarding their life and mission in cities dominated by their persecutors and despisers! So let us now investigate John’s letters to the seven principal churches of Asia Minor.

The revelation John has for the seven churches is given in seven messages, one for each church, and is found in Revelation 2 and 3. Each message deals with the same issues; only the content of the message is different, reflecting the condition of each church. The eternal Gospel is contextualized for each situation, so that it is relevant to each city.

First, each message reveals an understanding of the history, the commerce, and the religious and political roles of that city in the empire.

Second, each message deals with the question, “How have you responded, church, to your city, as you have sought to minister in and to it?” Each message describes the effect the city has had on the church and/or the church has had on the city.

Third, each message affirms, exhorts, and makes promises to the church around the question, “What is it that I, the Lord God, want you to do?” Each message calls the church to faithfulness in ministry to that city.

The first church that is addressed in Revelation is the church in the city of Ephesus. That message is found in Revelation 2:1-7. It is as follows:

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands:

I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this is to your credit; you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God” (Rev. 2:1-7).

First, note to whom the message is written. It is not written to the church itself, but “to *the angel* of the church in Ephesus”. This is a pattern repeated in each of the letters, for the messages to all the churches in Asia Minor actually are presented to the “angels” of these churches. This reference captures a primary belief of the church of the first century. They believed that every unit of society – a nation, a city, a church, even a tribe, had its “brooding” or “guardian” angel – that is, an interior spirituality that drove and shaped that social entity. Thus, each church would have its own “angel” as well. And it is that “angel” who gives to that church its essential spiritual quality – either for good or for evil. By addressing each message to the specific church’s angel, John is indicating that God is dealing with the primary spiritual entity of that church, and that church had better deal with that entity, also!

We can learn some things about the city of Ephesus from this passage because it includes one direct and one oblique reference to the city. The direct reference is to the “Nicolaitans”, a sect centered in Ephesus (we will examine the Nicolaitan cult later in this essay on the church in Ephesus). The oblique reference is in verse 1, in which the seven churches are referred to in terms of light: the “seven stars” and the “seven golden lampstands”. The inscription on all the official seals, banners and public buildings of Ephesus was the city’s motto: *Lumen Asiae* – the “Light of Asia”.

What do we know about Ephesus, and why did it call itself the “Light of Asia”? Ephesus was considered Asia’s greatest and most strategic city. It had the greatest harbor in Asia, was the center of Roman and pre-Roman Asian road network (all roads led to Ephesus as well as to Rome), and served as the political and economic gateway to Asia.

Ephesus was a free city, which meant that it was self-governing – not governed from Rome – and no Roman troops were permitted. It was also a judicial city, in which the Roman governor tried cases. It was the center of the worship of Artemis (Diana), whose worshippers formed one of the most important cults in the East, and it was a center for many other religious cults (including the Nicolaitans). As well, Ephesus was a metropolitan city, a “melting pot” of six different primary Greek and Asian tribal groups. So there were many metaphorical realities of why the city should be called the “Light of Asia”. But it had a concrete reason for that name, as well. In the New Testament era, Ephesus had street lighting along its famed Arcadius Street, of which Ammianus wrote, “The brilliancy of the lamps at night often equaled the light of day”.<sup>49</sup> So Ephesus rightly deserved the sobriquet, “Light of Asia”. Ephesus was a shining light to the rest of the Roman world of what a Roman city ought to be like. It was an example for all metropolitan centers to follow.

How has the church been affected by being in this “lighthouse” to the Roman world? It is intriguing to note the words and phrases John uses to describe the life and work of the Ephesian church: *hard work, perseverance, you cannot tolerate, you have tested, endured hardships, have not grown weary, and you hate the practices of the Nicolaitans* (i.e., you reject heresy). These are all defensive words, “hunkering-down” words, protective words. The church in Ephesus is being commended for surviving under attack!

What is pictured in this passage is a church under siege. The Ephesian church is being attacked from outside – by the “angel” of the city, confronted and tempted by the city’s wealth, power, cosmopolitan nature, ethical and moral corruption, and religious persuasion. This church is not in danger of being seduced by the city, for she is defending herself against it.

The Ephesian church is also being attacked from within – by the Nicolaitans – a particularly insidious “Christian” cult. The Nicolaitans were the followers of a Christian leader named Nicolaus, who sought to minimize the differences between Roman society and the Christian faith. The Nicolaitans stressed that the Jewish Law was no longer formative for faith or ethics, that Christians were free to eat meat offered to idols, and that Christians need not practice the chastity and sexual regulations of the Law. Rather, they taught that Christians were free to engage in both the feasts and the sexual promiscuity of the Romans, as well as to engage fully in Roman politics and their economic system. They believed that Christianity ought to be integrated into a culture, so that to be a good Christian and to be a good Roman would be the same thing, for Christianity should endorse and bless the Roman system. The Nicolaitans were the most dangerous of heretics because, if they had succeeded in their attempt to dominate the church, the world would have changed the Gospel instead of the Gospel changing the world.

John points out how the Ephesian church has dealt with such internal and external erosion. It has worked hard; it has put up with a great deal. The Ephesian Christians have stood

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<sup>49</sup> Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1961), p. 213.

against wicked people and tested their leadership in order to separate authentic disciples from imposters. They have exposed those who were liars, have been patient or persevered in their struggle, and have ended up suffering much. For such determination, they are deeply commended by God.

“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love” (vs. 4). This, of course, is no light complaint. But why – given what this church has endured – is this such a serious complaint?

Those in the Ephesian church have developed a siege mentality, not only toward the city, but toward each other. They have maintained the purity of their church by resisting temptation and keeping themselves orthodox, but in their grim and tight-lipped determination, they have lost their love for God and their love for each other.

This is often the high price orthodoxy exacts. The church maintains its purity, but at a price to its peace and its unity. It sacrifices Christian community to the preservation of its orthodoxy.

The angel of the church in Ephesus is severely wounded. Because of the attacks coming from within and without, that church’s spirituality of love has changed into a spirit of siege. To that degree, the Ephesian church has become truncated and demonically possessed!

What is it that God now wants the Ephesian church to do? How can it regain its lost love?

First, it must remember. “Remember the height from which you have fallen!” Recall your relationship with Christ and each other before you became absorbed in battling the pressures of this city and of the heretics in your midst. Realize the price you have paid in your absolutely necessary pursuit of orthodoxy and purity.

Second, it must repent. The word from God is quite terse. “Repent.” Turn from your sin. Recognize the price you had to pay to win those battles. Accept responsibility for your failure. Confess your sin to God and to one another. Amend your ways and commit yourselves to rediscover your first love.

Third, it must act. “Do the things you did at first.” Resolution and repentance alone are not enough. Action must follow reflection. Start all over again. Start treating your brother and sister Christians differently. Start spending quality time with God. Spend less energy defending the faith and more energy in celebrating the faith. Restore those broken relationships. Address those weaknesses. Heal those breaches. “You are already a church of purity,” God in essence is saying to the Ephesian church. “Now become a church of love and unity.”

Christ’s message to the Ephesian church and its angel is not yet completed. For one final question must be asked: “What will happen if the Ephesian church ignores Christ’s counsel and continues in its loveless orthodoxy?” Here is the answer:



“If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place” (Rev. 2:9).

This is not a cruel or vindictive judgment. It is simply a statement of fact – this is the way life is. If the Ephesian church continues its course of loveless orthodoxy, two things will happen to it. First, increasingly it will become a highly judgmental church, constantly determining who is “in” and who is “out”. The “in” group progressively will become a more rigidly defined and inevitably smaller group as it pushes out any persons voicing concern or raising questions about the group’s wisdom. This group will make itself the final arbiter of truth.

Second, the church will, with its increasingly judgmental attitude, adopt a pattern of growing joylessness and lovelessness which will demand that people keep justifying themselves and proving themselves to those who sit in judgment.

The result will be that this church’s “lampstand” will be taken “from its place”. That church inevitably will cease to grow. It will become progressively introspective and thus increasingly irrelevant to and rejected by its city and insulated from it and from any other Christians not of like mind. Thus, as it declines, it will slip out of the place which it now holds among the seven churches of Asia, until it has declined to become the least of all the churches in its impact upon non-Christians and influence upon the body of Christ. This is the inevitable end of an unrepentant and loveless orthodoxy!

To what, then, is the Ephesian church called if it is to be a faithful church? It is called to the practice of love and unity. “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (v. 7).

**Revelation 2:8-11** deals with the church in Smyrna.

“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life.

I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death” (2:8-11).

Smyrna was the other great city in Asia Minor, competitive with Ephesus. It did not have the economic or political power of Ephesus, but it was a great trading city and “the fairest of the cities of Iona” (Lucian). What contributed to its beauty included (1) a constant west wind that kept the city cool and fresh; (2) a land-locked harbor in the city’s heart, surrounded by rising hills upon which the city grew; and (3) the fact that it was one of the very few planned cities in the world and had great, broad streets, magnificent temples and planned architecture (the city, though founded in 1000 BCE, was destroyed and abandoned in 600 BCE and then rebuilt as a

planned city in 200 BCE, continuing to today as modern Izmar). It had an extremely large, vocal, and economically powerful Jewish colony.

Smyrna's most famous Christian was Polycarp, one of its earliest bishops, who was burned at the stake in that city on Saturday, 23 February, CE 155. When begged by the police captain to deny Christ, make sacrifice to Caesar, and thus live, Polycarp replied, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

John's message to the church in Smyrna indicates that this is a church under persecution. He uses the words *affliction*, *poverty*, and *imprisonment* to describe the church's state. It, too, is a church under siege. This siege is not that which comes through the temptations and seductions of a city, however. This is an intentional committal on the part of community leaders to put that church to death!

The church is being persecuted: its people are living in extreme poverty; some of them have been imprisoned; some suffer persecution; all of the people have been slandered. John identifies the source of the trouble: "those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." Smyrna had a large and economically strong Jewish colony, and it is that colony which is organized against the church (referring to people as "those who say they are Jews and are not" does not mean that they are not Jews, but that they are acting in ways that are inconsistent with and even deny their Jewishness). It is this "synagogue of Satan" (or assembly of the Jewish colonists) which is driving the persecution, making slanderous statements about the Christians, raising fear and anger at them, and thus motivating both the people and the state to persecute them. The church has a most formidable opponent in the Jewish colony in Smyrna.

What does God want the church of Smyrna to do in the face of such ominous persecution?

First, they are to keep their focus on Jesus. Christ is described in the message as "the First and the Last, who was dead and came to life." Christ is the creator of the world and will survive the world, bringing about its end. The Jews could kill him but they could not stop him, for he was raised to life again. In his resurrection, Christ exposed the lie of persecution-power by conquering the worst that life could inflict, thereby freeing us for life in him. By keeping their focus on Jesus, the Christians in Smyrna would be able to maintain their resolve and commitment, because they would remember constantly that "the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (I John 4:4).

Second, they are to stand firm and not allow themselves to fear about what they will continue to suffer. In essence, Jesus is saying to them: "Some of you will be placed in prison; some of you will suffer persecution. This is the inevitable outcome of the hatred which fills the hearts of the people in the 'synagogue of Satan'. You cannot stop that hatred. Nor can I change that which they are determined not to change. What you must do is to outlast them, to be faithful – even if it means death. Only in that way will this church and the Gospel survive in Smyrna. And you will receive 'the crown of (eternal) life'."

If the church in Smyrna is to be a faithful church, it will suffer. “Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death” (2:11).

**Revelation 2:12-17** deals with the Church in Pergamum.

“To the angel of the Church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword:

I know where you are living, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives. But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication. So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it” (2:12-17).

Whereas Ephesus and Smyrna were the economic and cultural “capitals” of Asia Minor, Pergamum was its political capital. It had been Asia Minor’s capital city for nearly four hundred years. In 282 BCE, it had been made the capital of the Seleucid Empire, and remained such until 133 BCE when it became the property of Rome. Rome then made Pergamum the capital of its province of Asia.

Pergamum was outstanding for many reasons. Its location was particularly commanding, situated on the top of a steep rocky hill; it dominated the broad plain below it. Second, it had the most outstanding library in Asia (two hundred thousand parchment rolls), second only to the library in Alexandria. In fact, parchment was invented in Pergamum. Third, it was a religious center, especially of the worship of Zeus and Athene, and particularly of the god Asclepius – the god of healing whose temples were actually hospitals. Fourth, it was the administrative center and political capital of the Roman Empire in Asia.

This fourth item was especially important, and was the reason why John called it the city “where Satan has his throne”. Because Pergamum was the administrative center and political capital of Roman Asia, it was the center of emperor worship in Asia. This was why John identified it as “where Satan lives” – because nothing was more Satanic to the mind of the early church than substituting Caesar for Christ as the one to whom your eternal allegiance belonged.

Like the church in Smyrna, the church in Pergamum was a church under attack. Because it existed in the city where Satan had his throne, and because the church very decisively opposed emperor worship, Rome would have quickly perceived this church as an enemy. It is likely, therefore, that the attack the Pergamum church was under from the Roman authorities was severe and continuous.

This church's troubles did not come from only the outside, however. It also had great troubles within, for the Nicolaitans and those "who hold to the teaching of Balaam" were there. We are already informed about the compromising perspective of the Nicolaitans. The Balaamites were probably a particular group of the Nicolaitan party which stressed participation in Roman worship (most likely, emperor worship), as well as participation in the Roman sexual practices. It was therefore a more liberal manifestation of the Nicolaitan perspective.

How did the Christians in Pergamum respond to dangers from without and within the church? The text makes it clear that they did not follow the course of the Ephesian church, which clung to the purity of the church. It is also clear that the church firmly resisted the threat of emperor worship (v. 13). Yet the church tolerated the presence of the Nicolaitans and Balaamites; that would mean that some of that church's members found these cults a suitable alternative amid the persecution.

What is it that John's message calls the church in Pergamum to do? One can sense that John wished for just a little more of the Ephesians' stiff backbone in this church. The church in Pergamum needed to continue to stand strong against emperor worship and not be tempted (like the Balaamites) to compromise with it in order to protect itself. The church needed to repent of the receptivity it had given to the Nicolaitans, and cast both them and the Balaamites out. It was to return to its spiritual origins by rediscovering the spirituality of the Eucharistic sacrament ("the hidden manna") and thus renew its relationship with the Bread of Life, Christ.

Jesus promised that when the church had repented, driven off the heretics, and renewed its interior spirituality, then it would be given "a white stone with a new name written on it." Likely, this is a reference to the pagan custom, especially popular among children, of carrying a white stone with a god's name upon it as a good luck amulet. For the church to be given a white stone would be a reminder to the Christians that they are safe in life and in death because they "carry" the name of the only true God around inside them.

If it is to be a faithful church, then, the church of Pergamum is instructed that it must follow its calling to stand strong in its faith and to make vital its relationship with Christ. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it" (v. 17).

**Revelation 2:18-29.** The next city under John's inspection is the city of Thyatira.

"To the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

I know your works – your love, faith, service, and patient endurance. I know that your last works are greater than the first. But I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her fornication. Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am

throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve. But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden; only hold fast to what you have until I come.

To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end, I will give authority over the nations; to rule them with an iron rod, as when clay pots are shattered – even as I also received authority from my Father. To the one who conquers I will also give the morning star. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (2:18-29).

Thyatira was the least important of the seven cities to which John wrote in Revelation. Because it was so unimportant, we can retrieve little information about it. Thyatira was in a valley on the road to Pergamum and was created initially as a defense for Pergamum. Virtually indefensible, the military purpose of Thyatira simply was to delay an army several days while Pergamum prepared for a siege. No longer needed as a military outpost once the Roman Empire ruled Asia Minor, Thyatira became a commercial center with a large number of guilds. Guilds about which we know were those established for people who worked with wool, leather, linen, bronze, outer garments, material dyeing, pottery, and baked goods, as well as those who traded slaves.

The guilds of ancient Roman society combined the legal and organizational power of today’s labor unions with the economic power of trade associations, the social influence of clubs and voluntary associations, and the political power of special interest groups. Since each guild had its patron god, it had a religious dimension to it, as well. So there were few systems in the Roman Empire more powerful or influential as were the guilds.

The issue of participation in a guild posed a particular problem to early Christians. To refuse to join the guild in your field would be to sacrifice all prospect of commercial success – or even economic existence. You would be shut out of the market. But to join would compromise your faith seriously. To be a part of a guild would entail cooperation in all the economic decisions made by that cartel, to participate in the sacrifices made to the guild’s god, and to participate in the common meals that were integral to each guild’s protocol and decision-making process. These common meals were often occasions for drunken revelry and immorality, behavior expected of all guild participants, but it was also the venue for making major plans and financial commitments to one another. How could a Christian conscientiously be a part of such an economic system? Yet were Christians to abdicate the business world entirely?

The church in Thyatira apparently was thriving and prosperous. It was known through the city for doing good deeds and serving the needy. Its members were generous, and exhibited deep love and loyalty to each other (v. 19). Anyone looking at this church would be attracted by the quality of its life and its commitment to the needy. It would be a church whose Sunday services probably were packed and of which any person would be proud to be a member.

But “I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel” (v. 20)! In the church in Thyatira there was apparently a very popular and persuasive woman, who was likely both a

business woman and a supposed Christian. She urged Christians not to cut themselves off from the political and economic life of their city, but instead to participate fully in the guilds. This included attending worship services to the guild's god, feasting at the common meals on the meat offered to that god, and even participating with gusto in the guild's sexual adventures. Why? Because it was good for business!

Apparently the church heard her gladly! With its acceptance of Jezebel's ways, this church had become an accommodating fellowship to the business life of Thyatira. As well, many of Thyatira's leading citizens, led by Jezebel, had joined that church so that the church apparently was healthy, popular, and successful.

Such corruption of the church, Jesus will not abide! So he declares through John that Jezebel will be cast down (v. 22), her businesses will fail (that is what v. 23, "I will strike her children dead" usually is considered to mean), those church members who were seduced by her compromising perspective and those citizens of Thyatira who joined the church because of her accommodating witness will be punished severely (v. 23). Only those who resisted Jezebel will escape the punishment; it is they who will possess "the morning star" (v. 28) – a term used exclusively for Jesus Christ – and so it will be they who will be saved.

To what, then, is the church in Thyatira called if it is to be a faithful church? It is called to reject its own popularity and the grounds upon which that popularity has been won. It is called to follow Christ. "To everyone who overcomes and continues to do my works to the end, . . . I will give the morning star. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (vv. 26, 28-29).

**Revelation 3:1-6.** The next letter is to the church in Sardis.

"To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars:

I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. Yet you have still a few persons in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes; they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

Sardis was almost a proverbial example of a city that was a contrast between past splendor and, at the time Revelation was written, present decay. It had been one of the greatest cities of the world seven centuries earlier, but by Roman times, it was only a shadow of its former self.

Set upon a ridge fifteen hundred feet above the plains, with the ridge's sides smooth and precipitous, Sardis was considered impregnable. It had been the capital city of the Lydian empire. The people in Lydian Sardis panned gold from the river Pactolus and were the first to mint coins. The greatest of the Lydian kings who ruled from Sardis was Croesus, whose reign was 560-546 BCE and whose name is still synonymous with wealth.

Croesus declared war on Cyrus of Persia, was defeated in battle, and retreated to Sardis which was soon under Persian siege. There seemed to be no way to take the city, high on its unassailable rock. Then, one day, a Persian soldier saw a Sardian soldier lose his helmet over the battlement. To the Persian's disbelief, he watched the Sardian easily climb down the sheer rock cliff to retrieve his hat.

The Persian soldier checked and found a deep fissure which would allow a man to climb up and down. That night a party of Persian troops climbed up the fault, scaled the walls, found the battlements unguarded and the watchers asleep, crept to the gates, and threw them open to admit the Persian army. And Sardis fell.

Amazingly, Sardis fell to the Seleucid army a second time two centuries later in the identical manner. When Christ commanded in his message to the church in Sardis, "Wake up!" it had a particularly relevant note for that city!

Although the church in Sardis had "a name (i.e., reputation) of being alive" (v. 1), it was really quite dead. Sardis was a city where watchmen would sleep and posted soldiers would be absent from their battlements, where the people were soft, lazy and comfortable, and the church had caught this infectious disease. This church was spiritually dead, unresponsive and lethargic.

Intriguingly, the church of Sardis faced none of the overwhelming problems of the other churches in Asia. It faced no heresy from within its ranks. It was not persecuted by the Jews. It was untroubled by the Roman authorities. It did not even face the seduction that comes with popularity. Any of the other churches gladly would have traded places with Sardis, just to get some relief! But it was the Sardian church which was dead. It did not even have enough controversy to birth a heresy! The people did not hold strongly enough to their convictions to become a target of persecution! It was simply a dull church!

What does the risen Christ demand of the church in Sardis? It is very simple: "Wake up" (v. 2)! Christ asks the church to shake itself awake and take action before it dies from boredom. And what must the church do to awaken itself? It must *remember* the Gospel it had received and experience once again its vitality. It must *repent* of its lethargic ways and recommit itself to a living Christianity. And it must *obey* the commands of the Gospel and begin living and acting with such conviction that persecution and theological debate could conceivably result (v. 3).

If the church does not act, what then? "If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you" in judgment (v. 3).

There is hope for some in the church in Sardis. There are some with a glimmer of life in them (vv. 4-5)! If they respond and keep watch on the battlements of the Sardian church, they

will not be wiped out of the Book of Life, but will have Christ confess them before God, and they will be honored in heaven (“dressed in white”) for their faithfulness. They, at least, will be saved.

The Sardian church is called to “wake up” if it is to be a faithful church. It is called to work against a passive and non-demanding Christianity. “If you conquer, you will be clothed in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (vv. 5-6).

**Revelation 3:7-13** is the message to the church in Philadelphia.

“To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, “These are the words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.”

I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying – I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.

I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the New Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

Philadelphia was a Greek city founded to be a missionary of Greek culture and language to Lydia and Phrygia. It was founded between 159 and 138 BCE by colonists from Pergamum and was named Philadelphia (“brotherly love”) because of the love the Seleucid king had for his brother. It is significant that the church is commended for its missionary activity as well – an “open door”. Three centuries before, Philadelphia had been given an open door to spread Greek ideas in the lands beyond; here it has another great missionary opportunity – to carry to Asia the message of the love of Jesus Christ!

The message to the church in Philadelphia begins with a celebration of who Christ is. He is proclaimed as the Holy One, the one in whom lies all reality, and the one who “has the key of David, who opens no one can shut, who shuts and no one opens” (v. 7). It is this vision of the opening and closing power of Christ which becomes the basic theme weaving through this message.

“I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied



my name” (v. 8). The church in Philadelphia may be small and weak, but it has been faithful to Christ against overpowering odds. Because it has been faithful, Christ is now going to open to this church the door of missionary opportunity (v. 8). He can entrust these Christians with such a responsibility for they have proved faithful in the past, and will continue to be faithful. With this responsibility, they will proclaim the Gospel to Jew and Gentile alike, and see both peoples come to Christ (v. 9). The Christians will face persecution and conflict because of their work (v. 10), but Christ will keep them through such ordeals.

Then Christ reminds the Christians in Philadelphia, “I am coming soon” (v. 11). He is coming, and this news is to be encouragement to them in their ministry, comfort to the oppressed, and warning to those who ignore Christianity. And if the church in Philadelphia remains faithful to the open door of missionary opportunity given to them, Christ will richly reward them. They will be seen as pillars in the heavenly temple of God (v. 12). Jesus will write upon them the name of his God, the name of that eternal city – the new Jerusalem – which they will inherit, and his own name which will witness to their eternal service to him (v. 12). Such is the reward for the faithful labor of a faithful church.

The church in Philadelphia proved to be the most successful of all the seven churches. Over the centuries as Islam spread across Asia Minor, the church in Philadelphia stood firm. The city remained the last bastion of Asian Christianity, not falling before the Muslims until the fourteenth century. The church continues today and has a bishop and about a thousand believers. With the exception of Smyrna, the other churches are in ruins. But Philadelphia still holds aloft the banner of the Christian faith!

To what, then, is the church in Philadelphia called if it is to be a faithful church? It is called to proclaim, practice and live out the Gospel in its city, to its region, and to the uttermost parts of the earth. “If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, and my own new name. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches”.

**Revelation 3:14-22** is the challenge to the final church in Asia Minor, the church in the city of Laodicea.

“To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God’s creation:

I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. I reprove and disciple those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent.

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

The city of Laodicea was founded in 250 BCE by Antiochus of Syria. It was strategically located where three major roads converged. It was, consequently, one of the wealthiest cities in the Roman Empire. A measure of its economic power was the fact that, when it was destroyed by an earthquake in 61 CE, the city’s citizens rebuilt the entire city out of its public and their private coffers. They refused any financial assistance from Rome. In fact, one citizen donated a stadium and others donated other public buildings out of their own treasuries.

It is intriguing to trace the sources of Laodicea’s prosperity, particularly in the light of Christ’s criticism of the church there. The city’s wealth came from three main sources. First, it was the center of the garment industry of Asia, specializing in raising black sheep which became the base for naturally black clothing. Second, it was Asia’s primary banking center, specializing in buying and selling gold. Third, it was a medical center specializing in ophthalmology, and many in the city made a great deal of money from the sale of eye ointments and salve.

The church in Laodicea is the only one of the seven churches about which the risen Christ has nothing good to say. His words of condemnation are crude and vivid; they have captured the imagination of the church for two thousand years because one recognizes their profound truth:

“I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (3:15-16).

It would be a terrible thing to have someone say to you, “You are a nauseating Christian.” But that is exactly what Jesus says of the Christians in the church of Laodicea. They make him want to vomit! Why? Because their Christianity is tepid, without conviction, indifferent. The risen Christ says to them, “I would rather you never had become Christians than to become the kind of Christians you are now!”

Why is this church without convictions and why is it indifferent? There are three reasons, all integrally linked to the fortunes of its city.

First, at the time of this writing, Laodicea is a city of great wealth; it is the banking capital of Asia. The Christians have been seduced by money into perceiving themselves as rich. They do not realize that, instead of being wealthy and in need of no support, they are in reality, “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked” (v. 17). Well, they are about to be refined like gold in the fire, so that all their dross can be burned away (v. 18a).

Second, Laodicea is the center of the garment industry of Asia. The Christians look at their rich clothes and think they have all anyone would need. In reality, they are naked before God and the rest of the church and need to have the integrity and insight to feel shame over that

nakedness. Rather than clothing themselves with the black wool of Laodicea's sheep, these Christians need to clothe themselves in the white robes of righteousness (v. 18b).

Third, Laodicea is a medical center specializing in ophthalmology and particularly in a highly curative eye salve. Yet, the church in Laodicea is spiritually blind. It needs to put spiritual eye salve on its corporate eyes so that it can begin to recognize its own blindness (v. 18c).

What must the spiritually impoverished, naked and blind church in Laodicea do if it is not to be vomited away by Christ? "I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you and you with me" (vv. 19-20).

The church must repent! It must get converted! It needs to recognize that it is Christian in name only, and receive Christ both as Lord and as Savior. And when those lukewarm, so-called Christians respond with an earnest commitment to Christ, they will discover that he is there, awaiting them. For he stands by the door of their church, ready to respond to their response. All they need to do is to undo the latch and swing wide the door, and he will enter into the life of their church, will break Communion bread with them, and will be at one with them.

To be a faithful church, the Laodicean Christians are called to repent of a conventional, indifferent Christianity, recognize their spiritual bankruptcy, and allow Christ to "remold them from within" (Rom. 12:2, Phillips). "To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (vv. 21-22).

This study of the seven city churches in Asia Minor first shows us the close relationship between the effectiveness of a church and the nature of the city in which it lives. Some of these churches were seduced by their cities, in one way or another allowing the Gospel to conform to the world rather than becoming agents to enable the world to be transformed by the Gospel. In different ways, the churches in Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis and Laodicea allowed themselves to become "worldly" churches (i.e., churches which were seduced in some essential way by the systems or lifestyles of their cities).

Other churches resisted the siren call of their cities. They had other problems, even substantive internal problems. But each church saw that it was its responsibility to deal with its city or confront the city's systems or seek the city's transformation. What was true of all these churches – the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna and Philadelphia – was that they assumed a proactive role toward their cities, rather than a reactive role.

First, the essential response of these seven urban churches to their respective cities was to engage the interior spirituality of their cities. Some of them were seduced by the city's angel. Others confronted that angel. Still other sought to convert the city's angel. But whether seduced, confrontational or evangelistic, the church could not avoid being influenced by and

influencing the interior spirituality of its city. The city's angel was as powerful as was the angel of the church.

Second, we observe that all seven churches were called to be faithful to the Gospel – not successful! Success was not to be an acceptable motivation for any of them (not even the church in Philadelphia). But whereas all were called to be faithful, each would express faithfulness in a different way. To be faithful to Christ's call to them meant that –

- ? The church in Ephesus had to undertake the practice of love and unity;
- ? The church in Smyrna needed to be willing to suffer;
- ? The church in Pergamum had to stand strong in its faith and make vital its relationship with Christ;
- ? The church in Thyatira had to be willing to reject its own popularity and the grounds upon which that popularity had been won, and it had to be willing to follow an unpopular Christ;
- ? The church in Sardis had to “wake up” to its own passivity and seek a Christianity that was dynamic and full of conviction;
- ? The church in Philadelphia had to be willing to proclaim, practice and live out the Gospel in an assertive manner in that city;
- ? The church in Laodicea had to humbly recognize its own spiritual bankruptcy, repent of a conventional, indifferent Christianity, and allow Christ to remold that church and its people from within.

Third, it was the vision of the New Jerusalem which was to inform the faithfulness of each of the seven churches. If all the risen Christ wanted to do was to confront these churches with their respective issues and to call them to accountability and action, the book of Revelation would have ended with chapter three! But the book continues; it presents a profound picture of the struggle between the powers of God and the powers of darkness for the soul of the world. It reveals what the city given over fully to Satan becomes (the whore city Babylon in chs. 17-18). And it climaxes with the vision of the New Jerusalem – the city as God intended it to be (chs. 21-22).

Those seven churches were given this vision of the New Jerusalem both to inform them and to encourage them as they sought to be faithful to Jesus Christ in their individual cities. Since faithfulness was contextualized to each situation, it was the one, common vision that knit these churches together into one body of Christ. It was that vision which answered the question for all the churches, “Why should we be faithful?” It was not just to make God happy. It was not so they might somehow be doing what was right. They were to be faithful as an integral part of God's plan to bring about God's kingdom – not only in Asia Minor – but throughout the whole world. Those seven churches (as are all churches) were an integral part of the fulfillment

of that plan. So, although the kingdom ultimately would come by God's action, each church was to perform its ministry as if the kingdom's coming depended upon the individual church's faithfulness.

What do we learn from this exploration of Revelation 2-3 about the faithfulness to which we are called in the city?

First, we realize that we cannot avoid interaction with our city's spirituality, and to seek to avoid dealing with our city's spirituality is, in reality, the height of unfaithfulness. We must deal directly with that spirituality, or it will seduce us.

We can be seduced in many ways. Like Thyatira, we can yield to the temptation to propound a popular and sanitized Christianity. Like Sardis, we can become lethargic in response to our city's primary issues. Like Pergamum, we can become so fixated on our internal problems that we lose sight of our responsibility toward the city. Or, like Laodicea, we can simply go about the business of running our church, while ignoring the city, allowing its angel to blind us to the reality that the priorities of the city are infiltrating and dominating our church. Thus, ignoring our obligations to the city while concentrating on maintaining our church becomes a sure way that the city's angel can seduce us into irrelevancy.

Or we can choose to interact with our city's spirituality. Like Ephesus and Smyrna, we can confront the city's angel at the point of our church's particular call. That may require us to suffer at the hands of the city (Smyrna) or it may press us into a different way of being church (as it did with Ephesus). Like Philadelphia, it might mean that we would seek the conversion of the city. But whether we are confronting, advocating the cause of the poor and weak, participating with the powerless in their struggle for self-determination, or proclaiming life- and system-transforming Good News to those who shape and who are seduced by the systems, faithful response to the Gospel calls us to deal with our city's spirituality. For only by dealing with the spiritual depths of our city – with its angel – will we participate in bringing about any permanent change in our city and in its people!

Second, we learn from this interaction with Revelation 2-3 that God's call to each of us in the city is to be faithful, not to be successful. This is not to say that success is never an option, but if it comes, it should come as a result of our faithfulness, not as an objective toward which we worked! Our objective must be to be faithful to the call God has given God's church in and to that city. If the faithful pursuit of that call leads to the church's success, praise God! But if that faithful pursuit leads to other results, we should praise God for that as well!

Faithfulness is not measured simply by following scriptural directives. Faithfulness must be contextualized. In the case of each of the seven churches, their faithfulness was determined by an exploration of the issues and needs of each city, the response of the church thus far to those issues, and in the light of such analysis, an accurate perception of the next risky steps of faith into which God was calling each church. Faithfulness must always be contextualized. Contextualization occurs only when the church in the city is willing to look objectively at the systems of its city and look honestly at that church's response to those systems as well as its own interior life.

Third, we learn from this study of Revelation 2-3 that the faithfulness to which we are called as the city church is a faithfulness that must be informed by the vision of the New Jerusalem. In other scripture, other names are given to that vision – the kingdom of God, a new heaven and new earth, the shalom community. But whether kingdom of God, shalom community or the New Jerusalem, the biblical vision is of society culminating in God’s political, economic and spiritual intentions for it.

Here in the book of Revelation, that biblical vision of the kingdom comes to its climax! It comes to that fulfillment through the image of the New Jerusalem. Life is fulfilled for all humanity in a God-shaped city. That is God’s best intention for humankind. It is that vision which we are to keep before ourselves, into which we should live, and for which we should work. Only by maintaining this vision can we faithfully seek to be God’s church in our own city to which God has called us!<sup>50</sup>

**Revelation 11:15-19** deals with both judgment and grace.

“Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever.’

Then the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, singing, ‘We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty, who are and who were, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints and all who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying those who destroy the earth.’ Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.”

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord.” Note that the Scripture does *not* say “the kingdoms of the world” (as Handel does in his “Hallelujah Chorus”). There is a profound difference between *kingdoms* and *kingdom!*

To say “kingdoms of this world” is to say that all the political entities, all nations and their rulers, will be transformed or converted into the kingdom of God. But to say “the kingdom of this world” means the current world order. The cosmos – the created order, the earth and its inhabitants, the whole of human activity, the world alienated and at enmity with God, the world in the grip of Satan and his demonic powers – that world will be converted into the kingdom of God! Every knee will bow and every tongue confess Christ as Lord. And those people, systems and powers that steadfastly refuse to bow the knee will decree their own inevitable fate. Thus, in reality, all knees will bow and tongues confess, whether in praise or in despair. Because the kingdom of this world will, indeed, become the kingdom of our Christ.

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<sup>50</sup> Taken from the book authored by Robert Linthicum, *City of God; City of Satan: A Biblical Theology of the Urban Church* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1991), pp. 294-313.

“The time has come . . . for destroying those who destroy the earth.” The earth (the systems, the cosmos) is not inherently, *ipso facto* evil. It has the marks of alienation from God because of the alienation of the people on it. The people are destroying the earth, and that is what causes it to be corrupt and decaying. If there is evil on the earth, it is because of the evil of its inhabitants. The phrase “destroying the earth” takes on a very literal and expanded meaning today, as industrialized humanity pollutes the environment, devours nature resources, levels mountains, destroys rain forests, artificially warms the atmosphere, floods the planet, and allows the ultimate desecration of the earth with the potential of nuclear holocaust. So the time will come “for destroying those who destroy the earth”!

But the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of his Christ. The transformation will happen. There will be judgment. There will be mourning for a depleted and corrupt world. One corporate entity (“the kingdom of the world”) will be transformed into another corporate entity (“the kingdom of the Lord”). And Christ’s redemptive work will be finished with the transformation of the entire cosmos.

What insights does this Scripture passage give us about Christ’s redemptive work in our world? It stresses that Christ saves more than people. His work of salvation is one of redemption of the individual, of humanity’s systems, of the corporate dimensions of human activity, and even of the spiritual powers which infuse and radically influence the systems and the corporate existence of humanity. Every structure – the family, the church, the community, the city, the nation, the universe – falls from grace, sins grievously against its Maker, and yet is so loved by him that he has provided a way for its salvation and transformation through Christ.

John writes elsewhere, “The Son of God was revealed for this purpose: to destroy the works of the devil” (I John 3:8). The purpose of Christ’s coming is to enervate the devil, to eliminate his power, to destroy his effectiveness. If the city is a battleground between God and Satan, this passage reminds us that Christ came to the city to die in order to undo all that Satan has done among its people, systems, and principalities!

**Revelation 17:1—19:10.** Before the author of Revelation describes the world as God will someday make it be – the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1—22:21; see C Eastertide 5, 6 and Ascension Sunday), he first paints a picture of Babylon as the city of Satan (Rev. 17:1—19:10). Here we examine the eventual outcome of a city which has no redeeming value, a city given over to the wholehearted worship and pursuit of greed, domination and unilateral power. The author initially shows us what caused the archetypal Babylon, the “great city, Babylon, the mighty” (18:10) to become solely a city of Satan.

***First, Babylon has become the city of Satan because she chose to commit herself to the worship of another god than Yahweh.***

“Come, I will show you the judgment of the great whore who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk” (17:1-2).

“(The angel) called out with a mighty voice, ‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! It has become a dwelling place of demons, a haunt of every foul and hateful bird, and a haunt of every foul and hateful beast. For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxury’” (18:2-3).

“And the kings of the earth, who committed fornication and lived in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning; they will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say, ‘Alas, alas, the great city, Babylon, the mighty city! For in one hour your judgment has come’” (18:9-10).

What is the fornication which Babylon has committed with the kings and nations of the world? What is the adultery in which all her people participated? Keeping in mind that Revelation is apocalyptic literature (i.e., writing marked by symbolic imagery and the expectation of an imminent cosmic catastrophe), *adultery* obviously does not mean illegitimate sexual intercourse. *Adultery* is used regularly by the Old Testament prophets as a pseudonym for *idolatry* (e.g., Jer. 3:8; 29:23; Ezek. 16:32; 23:37). Babylon’s primary sin was idolatry.

Who is the god to whom Babylon gives herself with such reckless and wanton abandon? It is the Roman emperor! Babylon has committed herself to the worship of the emperor and of the empire which he personifies. In order to maintain the empire, Rome had to make space within it for Hellenistic culture, the Oriental mystery religions, and Greek philosophy. These forces provided the psychological cement that held the empire together. Dependence on such movements to make the empire cohesive, however, was not enough because these elements did not center sufficient focus on Rome itself. Thus it was that the Romans were forced to invent a central focus for the empire; thus, they established the worship of past emperor-gods and the celebration of the “genius” (or “divine spark”) of the present ruler.

Emperor worship did supply the cement necessary to hold the Roman Empire together. You were free to hold to whatever philosophy you chose, to practice the culture of your people, to worship any gods you wished to worship – as long as you also worshiped the emperor. Emperor worship was required of all inhabitants of the Roman Empire except for the Jews (and Christianity was not perceived by the Romans as an extension of Judaism). Therefore, when a Christian refused to worship the emperor he or she committed treason against the state! Such Christians therefore invited upon themselves the persecution and wrath of Rome (incidentally, this was why the official charge against the Christians was that they were “atheists”, because they did not believe that the emperor was divine and refused to worship him). Precisely because they refused to worship the emperor, church leaders like Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, were put to death.

The early Christians simply did not accommodate themselves to Rome and worship the emperor because to do so was to act in an idolatrous manner. Emperor worship made a human being (the emperor) and a human institution (the Roman Empire) into a god. This was hubris of the grossest kind! But it was more than that. To make anything other than God into god is the original sin – that which broke relationship with God in the first place, that which epitomized the



sin of Satan which caused his ejection from paradise (Isa. 14:12-15), that which undermined all systems and structures of all the cities of the past, and that which empowered the principalities and powers to capture the city's and nation's systems. To worship the emperor was simply to deny God!

Therefore, for Babylon to commit herself solely to emperor worship was not only to bring about her spiritual disintegration, but also to cause the corruption of the people of her city, and the nations and kings in relationship with her. With her total and complete submission to emperor worship and idolatry, Babylon's interior spirituality had become irredeemably evil. Babylon had become the city of Satan first of all because she had committed herself to the worship of another god.

***The second reason Babylon had become the city of Satan was that she had given herself to the unconditional exploitation of the world in order to foster her own economic security and luxury.*** The author of Revelation writes:

“The woman (Babylon) was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: ‘Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth’s abominations’” (17:4-5).

“The merchants of the earth weep and mourn for Babylon, since no one buys their cargo anymore, cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves – and human lives.

The merchants cried, “The fruit for which your soul longed has gone from you, and all your dainties and your splendor are lost to you, never to be found again.” The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud, “Alas, alas, the great city, clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels and with pearls! For in one hour all this wealth has been laid waste!”

And all shipmasters and seafarers, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning, “What city was like the great city?” And they threw dust on their heads, as they wept and mourned, crying out, “Alas, alas, the great city, where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth! For in one hour she has been laid waste”” (18:11-19).

Babylon's demand for wealth, economic security, and luxury has brought the wealth of the world to her; it was brought through both her economic power and her military strength. The movement of all conceivable goods through her ports has greatly enriched the merchants, mariners and kings of the world (and now you can understand why kings very willingly submitted to her “adulteries”). But this great, ongoing contribution to her luxurious refinements and economic security had to be done at the price of the economic well-being of the remainder of the world. In essence, all the rest of the world had become the third world to Babylon; Babylon

was enriched but the price of that enrichment was the destitution of the other countries and peoples of the world.

So in her commitment to another god than God, Babylon had –

- ? Seduced the peoples of the world
- ? Gotten all rulers to participate in this seduction (thus uniting the political and the religious systems of the world)
- ? Used the worship of her god as the means for her economic development (thus uniting the economic and religious systems of the world for her benefit).

To the author of Revelation, such grave misuse of the economic order was equal to the sin of idolatry. For Babylon's greed and lust for wealth and economic security raped the rest of the world, leaving it helpless and destitute, unable to cope either nationally or individually with the exigencies of life. The radical impoverishment of the world, both of its peoples and its natural resources, meant nothing to Babylon, as long as she could have her little niceties and obscene luxuries.

***The third reason why Babylon has become the city of Satan was because of her radical misuse of her political power in order to dominate the world, thus leading to the oppression of all who represented a threat to her.*** The author of Revelation tells us:

“I saw that the woman, Babylon, was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus” (17:6).

“And in you, Babylon, was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slaughtered on earth” (18:24).

There are two groups of people the text tells us who were persecuted unto death by Babylon: the prophets and the saints. The saints, of course, are the Christians. The prophets are those in a city who speak truth to power (whether Christian or not), and call the city's leadership to accountability. These Scripture passages remind us that no government will tolerate being questioned at its very depths.

The prophets were questioning the intentional idolatry, the economic exploitation of the world for the accumulation of that city's luxury, and both the political suppression of dissidents and the oppression of all who would question the ethics and intentions of the city's or nation's government. The Christians questioned the policies which the economic, political and religious systems of Babylon were using to deceive both themselves and their citizens; the Christians also proclaimed by their very lifestyle an alternate way of life in total opposition to the one which the people and systems of the city had accepted as their own. The marriage of an economics of privilege and exploitation, a politics of oppression and a religion of idolatrous control inevitably resulted in the martyrdom of the poor, the prophetic, and the spiritually liberated of the city. There was no longer any place for such people as these in a city given over solely to Satan!

So, *what would be the inevitable result of a city or nation completely given over to Satan?* The author of Revelation tells us:

“Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, ‘With such violence Babylon the great city will be thrown down, and will be found no more; and the sound of harpists and minstrels and of flutists and trumpeters will be heard in you no more; and an artisan of any trade will be found in you no more; and the sound of the millstone will be heard in you no more; and the light of a lamp will shine in you no more; and the voice of bridegroom and bride will be heard in you no more; for your merchants were the magnates of the earth, and all nations were deceived by your sorcery. And in you was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slaughtered on earth.’

After this, I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, ‘Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power to our God, for his judgments are true and just; he has judged the great whore who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants.’ Once more they said, ‘Hallelujah! The smoke goes up from her forever and ever.’ And the twenty four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who is seated on the throne” (18:21-19:4).

Babylon has become a city in which its systems and its people have given themselves solely (“soul-ly”, as well) to the making of the state into a god, economic injustice and political oppression in which the demonic principalities and powers are now in full control. The consequence of total submission to such corporate evil in the city’s or nation’s economic, political and religious life is its total destruction. It has destroyed itself spiritually. Therefore its physical destruction is inevitable.

That destruction finally occurs. And “the smoke from Babylon goes up forever and ever”, The city and empire is rejected by God and eventually annihilated because it has given itself over fully to the economic exploitation of its and the world’s poor, its service of the economically privileged, its effort politically to be in total control and its consequent oppression of the weak and of the truth-tellers, and the selection of either its economic or its political order to serve as the center of its true and daily religion. Such seduction of its systems (and through the systems, its people) has led to that city’s and nation’s shaping of its own interior spirituality, so that it has become irredeemably evil. Such, the author of Revelation tells us in chapters 17 through 19, is the inevitable end of any city or nation that centers itself in wealth, power and domination.

Let him who has ears, hear what the Spirit of God says to God’s people!