

The Law of Moses

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Introduction

This will be a close examination of Biblical Law. We will review pertinent bits from the Law of Moses, as an example of divine priorities. The point is to gain a sense of certainty about what is good and right in rather concrete terms that our minds can use. We are preparing our minds for the call to ever improve our Kingdom service. When the mind is more consistently aligned with divine priorities, it's a lot easier for the heart to speak of your convictions. You'll be better able to hear; your fleshly assets will serve to amplify the Truth.

Keep this in mind: **The Covenant Law applied only to those under the Covenant.** This was not simply a system of national law, but Covenant Law.

A Different Standard from the Herd

If you dig into the Law of Moses, you'll find references to stoning as a primary means of execution for capital sins. There are a dozen instances where it is commanded:

1. Touching Mt. Sinai during the meeting with God (Ex 19:12-13; Heb 12:20-21)
2. Breaking the Sabbath (Num 15:32-36)
3. Child sacrifice to idols (Lev 20:2)
4. Being a medium or wizard (Lev 20:27)
5. Cursing God or blaspheming (Lev 24:10-16, 23)
6. Idolatry (Deut 17:2-5)
7. Someone who entices another to commit idolatry (Deut 13:6-11)
8. Rebellion against parents (Deut 21:18-21)
9. A woman who falsely claimed to be a virgin at marriage (Deut 22:13-21)
10. Sex with a virgin betrothed to another man (Deut 22:23-24)
11. Adultery (Lev 20:10; implied by Jn 8:3-5) (both man and woman to be stoned)
12. An ox that gored someone to death was also to be stoned (Ex 21:28,32)

Stoning was a ritual execution. The actual method was not so much throwing the rocks as dropping them on someone who was in a low place. It could be a natural pit or one dug for the purpose, but the idea was to bury the person under the stones dropped on them. It was presumed each member of the community involved would drop at least one stone, and the size of the resulting heap indicated something of the seriousness of their crime.

So the emphasis was on the community recognizing how the particular sin threatened their *shalom*. Typically the person making the accusation – the witness, the person with the evidence – was the first to drop their stone on the perpetrator. This presumes that, if their conscience afflicted them in any way, they couldn't do it, and no one else would, either. This called for a sense of conviction about holiness and moral threats.

It was always possible to whip up a crowd and end up with a lynching. This is part of why there were rules about evidence. It's not so much that two people must directly witness the crime, but that there had to be pretty strong evidence. For all its flaws, this was a pretty good

system in the context of the people, culture and historical setting. Refusing to act would allow moral rot to take hold, but overly hasty actions would do the same.

At the same time, it rested on a presumption of heart-led living. Without that, any system breaks down quickly. Given that our Western world militates against the heart-led way, we should hardly be surprised at the strong showing of rule by hysteria in the West. This is how SJWs get their way. This is how a nation is herded into supporting blatant evil. All of the focus goes to imaginary threats, while the most egregious depravity is covered up.

I don't promote the stringency of Mosaic Law in our social context. In Christ we learn that much of the law code was more important for its symbolism. At the same time, our Western heritage makes this life far too precious, putting things way out of balance. The balancing act takes place in your heart, not in your head. God doesn't speak to fallen human intelligence, but to human commitment and faith, which is seated in the heart.

Don't believe the lynching mobs trying to silence people unfairly. Cling to a different standard, the Word of God.

What God Has in Mind

Things I've seen lately suggest I need to address this again: Biblical Law is not *legislation* in the Western sense. Legalism is a perversion of what God intended. It's not a question of the letter versus the spirit of the law; it's a question of the Person behind the law. If you don't see the difference, I'm not sure I can help you.

But I'm going to try. The intent of the Law Covenants is to provide an intellectual frame of reference that roughly translates the character of the Person behind the law. It's feudalism through and through – you are accountable to a Person who knows you better than you know yourself. Any attempt to make the law stand on its own is idolatry, because the hidden dirty hand there is that it raises up the self as god. The Devil is in that; anything that puts the human capabilities on the throne means self-idolatry. It makes the fallen flesh into a deity, and Satan is the only real presence behind any deity that isn't Jehovah. The hidden frame of reference behind “the rule of law” is that man is god. And it becomes the excuse for the elite serving Satan to enslave us to them.

The only way to keep God on the throne is to force us to fall back upon our convictions. The convictions are written on the heart by the finger of God. By itself that is not optimal, since most humans start out with a load of intellectual and cultural baggage that is far, far away from divine revelation. We simply aren't ready to imagine what God requires. This is why God has always preserved a written record of revelation. But the written record of the Word is not the Word itself. The Word is God Himself. The written record provides the proper path back to Him. We do not worship the written record – AKA, “bibliolatry”. We worship the God behind it.

However, the word “reverence” is appropriate for how we treat the Bible. It is the starting point, the frame of reference for the mind so that we can obey. The written record of revelation teaches us how to think like those whom God historically blessed under His Covenant.

Did Hosea break the Law of Moses in order to obey his God? If you approach it from that angle, then yes, Hosea disobeyed the law by marrying a prostitute. Yet he obeyed the God behind the law. He obeyed his convictions. It's not that the law was no limitation to his convictions, but that the law was the background against which the convictions had meaning, by which

convictions came to life. It wasn't some kind of special dispensation, a special permit of license. That's the wrong approach to understanding what happened there. It was a question of priorities.

Imagining a special dispensation is also the wrong approach to understanding Jesus. His miracles were already written into the Covenant of Moses, so nothing He did was outside what God might do through any of us. He said that Himself (John 14:12-13). Thus, the law was never a restraint, but a set of powers and privileges based on boundaries that keep us out of defilement. It's written to resolve the human habit of thinking that everything is a matter of instrumentality, that it's a matter of mechanics. You cannot explain miracles, but you can count on them as normal and regular.

How did Hezekiah defeat the Assyrians? It wasn't by human warfare or by any prescribed ritual. There was no ritual that covered that situation. Rather, the rituals in the Law of Moses informed Hezekiah how to approach the God who made all things, and provided the background on how he should communicate with God.

So when Paul talked about blessing those who persecute you (Romans 12:9-21), he quotes Proverbs 25:21-22. It falls into the same category as turning the other cheek. It's not a rule of combat; it's a tactic that has its place in your repertoire. Hezekiah didn't host a feast for the invading Assyrians. But King David did feed the abandoned servant of an enemy he pursued in the wilderness (1 Samuel 30). It's not a matter of rules. It's a matter of fitting the context into the character of God.

Do you have a burning conviction about resisting an evil government? Put it in context. If you use the ways of mere men in preparing such a resistance, you will place yourself outside the covenant protections. Your resistance will be subject to the vagaries of secular limits and random chance, acting without the knowledge of God's will and His plans. If you first form a covenant community of faith, then you are in a position to resist as Hezekiah did, receiving a word from God. You get to approach the Lord and hear from Him His plans on the matter, and you are in a position to see miracles.

In Luke 14:25-32, Jesus spoke of counting the cost. You need the calculus of divine power and plans on your side. When faith and conviction are part of the equation, it can change the outcome completely. He didn't say, "Surrender every time." He said to be sure you get with the Father before you decide how to proceed. It's not that resistance is always wrong, but that you should always stand ready to surrender so that you can hear God tell you when it's time to resist. And it's not a matter of always winning, but of knowing whether God wants you to resist regardless of the outcome. It's not a question of what works, as humans measure such things, but what works to keep you at peace with God.

Israel marched into the Promised Land and defeated giants, beat down chariots with mere infantry, and chased off much larger armed forces. They also got chased off by the tiny forces guarding Ai. It was a matter of having taken the time to hear from God first, of being ready to obey regardless of the outcome. It's two separate questions. One is, "Shall we go out to battle?" The second is, "Will you deliver the enemy into our hands?" He may not answer the second question, but He never fails to answer the first.

One thing is for sure: You cannot reap the harvest of *shalom* without the full weight of Biblical Law behind you. If you do not first come together in a community covenant of faith, any resistance is sheer potluck and meaningless. It is vanity and striving after the wind. Only when

you can stand together under covenant law can you begin to see what God has in mind.

Exodus 20:1-17

God takes you where you are, and speaks the language you recognize, in order to move you where He wants you. The language of the Covenant begins with a suzerain-vassal treaty. It's a form the Hebrew people would have recognized, all the way back to Abraham and even before. This first section is typically called the Ten Commandments (AKA Decalogue). It depends on whom you ask how they are divided and listed as ten separate items. We won't bother with that here. The point is that this represents an image of what God wants to see in His people.

So this is just an overview. It is the part written for all to see and review often. It's meant to be fairly concrete and simple. It would never occur to Hebrew people at this point in their history to play semantic games. They would understand what was demanded here. The rest of the Books of Moses are judgments the Lord made regarding various issues, but these first provisions here are universal, with no context needed.

The prologue is simple: Jehovah identifies Himself as the deliverer who invested a ransom for this nation. He took them from slavery and set them free to serve Him. They owe Him their very lives. He is *their* God; He owns them.

The wording of the next line says that He will not tolerate them attempting to adopt foreign deities, strangers who have no interest in them, who did nothing for them. The wording echoes many marriage covenants: They are His bride and shall not turn to any other man for support and love. Thus, the Covenant already starts to be tinged with other types of covenant.

Next, He will not tolerate the use of idols in His household, images dedicated to Himself or any other. They must not use anything they can make with their hands to form a barrier between them and God. They must learn to come before Him personally and directly. No proxies allowed. He will treat it like adultery, and His memory of such things is longer than any of them could live.

By the same token, He shows favor to those who genuinely favor Him. He doesn't lose track of those who love Him. But He will not tolerate people defaming Him and tearing down His reputation. Don't act in ways that will embarrass Him. Don't pretend you can keep secret your lack of respect for Him. If you rally under His banner, don't cross Him.

One of the best ways to honor Him is to remember that He claims each seventh day for Himself. You can't use it for your own purposes; it belongs to God and will be rendered as your justly owed time-tax. No one will be required to work for you on that day, whether it be family, slave, or animal. Don't allow your guests to work for profit, either. Everything you do on that day will belong to God. He rested from His labor of Creation on the seventh day, and you will, too.

Live so that people around you get the impression your parents were really wise. Don't make them look bad. God expects His people to maintain a stable society from generation to generation, so take the established customs seriously. God will honor your commitment to that stability by keeping you alive long enough to pass on your wisdom and experience.

Don't murder; don't kill people for your own personal gain. Killing is reserved for protecting the Covenant.

Don't break your marriage vows. People who cheat on their spouses are cheating on their God.

Don't plunder your own people. Respect their property as you would your own. They are your family; defend their control of their possessions.

Don't betray your people by lying about them. Report the honest truth of what you have witnessed about them, for good or ill.

Don't let your fleshly lusts for things of this world turn you against your people. Don't let envy corrupt your heart, making you a threat to them. Be glad and grateful for what your God provides you and trust Him for your needs. Stick to your mission and calling and mind your own business.

The context is entirely Ancient Near Eastern feudalism. This list offers a very potent warning that He regards them all as one family under His adoption. If anyone has a complaint against his brother or sister, he must bring it before the Lord. We must not take matters into our own hands, but defer to His decisions in all things. They must cling to Him first, and then to each other.

Exodus 20:18-26

We have seen the Ten Commandments, the initial overview of God's moral standards for His nation. He's taking it slow and easy with them, introducing Himself and His ways incrementally.

But first, He wants to impress on them just how real this is. Some of this drama Moses and his assistants could have faked, but not all of it. What got the people's attention was a combination of things. There was the nerve jangling noise that isn't described very clearly, only that it was loud, and the context implies it could be felt. There were flashes of lightning. Something they would surely recognize was the sound of a *shofar*, the traditional signaling instrument made from a hollowed out ram's horn. The whole mountain was covered in a dark cloud, like thick smoke, but without the choking fumes.

The nation would have been assembled in a large open space, gathered by clans behind their tribal elders. The whole crowd backed off away from the foot of the mountain because of this demonstration of power. They murmured to their leaders, who in turn told Moses the people were terrified at the idea that God would speak to them, if this were any representation of His power. They would rather hear from Moses as God's human spokesman.

Moses explained that all of this was a test. God wanted to show them some representation of His power so they would take the whole thing seriously. Don't play games with God. If they expected to be at peace with their new Sovereign, they needed to commit to Him from the heart. God tacitly accepted their proposal to have Moses serve as His voice to them, since this was His plan in the first place. He was going to hold them to it.

To emphasize that point, Moses went back into that terrifying dark cloud of God's Presence. While there, the Lord told Moses what he must tell them as the next step in their introduction to God's ways. The starting point on this path is for them to realize that God had indeed spoken to them Himself from Heaven, and they witnessed that God spoke with Moses. Let there be no further questions about whom God chose to represent Him.

Then the Lord cites what was up to that point the common knowledge of those who sought His attention. We can see how this simplified protocol appears several times later on. It would have been the core of what Balaam knew as a scholar of deities (Numbers 23), though perhaps his

was a somewhat confused version. Here the Lord clarifies things as the foundation upon which one builds a proper worship of Him.

There shall be no images of Him, nor any other deities in His domain. The wording almost sneers at the notion that human hands can shape something that would suffice in the first place to portray any deity. Even silver and gold, their most precious materials in that time and place, were not good enough. God demanded personal devotion, not some silly rituals via some inert proxy.

His altar would be the one He made Himself – plain earth. This would include dirt and/or stones. Everywhere they went as tent-dwelling nomads, when God appointed in that place that they should raise a monument to His name and offer up the various gifts that He would accept, they must build it from the materials of the ground. And if the ground was mostly stones, then they must use them as is. Any tooling was defiling. God would provide; they must use what He provides in the condition they find it. They can move it and stack it, but nothing more.

Finally, it can't be raised up very high. There should be no need for stairs or ramps. This changes later, but He makes obvious the reason for this provision: His worship must be sober and without vulgarity. Unnecessary exposure of certain body parts was defiling. Most men did not wear long flowing robes, but shorter garments with no underwear. So to prevent any accidental exposure, whoever presents the offering on the altar must be standing down on ground level, so the altar must also be reachable from the ground.

This was pretty much what had stood under the Covenant of Noah. This is the baseline for calling on the Creator of all things. It was not likely all that new to them, but was a clarification of things that might have been obscured by conflicting traditions. Here is God culling the junk notions about Himself, and through Moses pulling out from the confused mass of traditions what was the actual true story about Him.

Exodus 21:12-27

We need to review some historical context here. The ancient Hebrew people were tribal and feudal. Their social stratification bore little resemblance to that of Medieval Europe; this was not a feudalism of lands and titles, but of people and leadership. In general, each household would host at least a couple of men-at-arms, professional soldiers by the ancient Hebrew standard. It's not that they didn't do more common work, but they did hold a certain privilege regarding physical violence, because they were trained as to when it was proper. They had a code of honor of sorts, though nothing like Western chivalry.

Hebrew feudal order was more a matter of how many people could a man shepherd. Moses divided them up with a chief over households of ten men, fifty men, a hundred, and a thousand (Exodus 18). These numbers were flexible, of course, but the point is gaining some idea of how a chief might be over his own close household of ten, and he would be subject to an elder over fifty, who was in turn subject to an elder over one hundred, etc. Each of these men could call on their higher elder to handle something for which they doubted their own judgment. It was partly by birth, but also a matter of community consensus, and sometimes other factors who assumed the role of chief at various levels. However, in practice, the chief was typically the man best able to lead in battle, either directly or as a wise tactician. He was also considered wise enough to judge civil matters, or to appoint someone else to bear that load.

But his was the final authority over the people in his care who misbehaved. The point at which a

man ranked high enough to carry out an execution appears to have varied over the history of the nation, but it was typically rather low on the chain for something obvious, where the penalty was not in doubt. Sometimes a crime committed by someone from a neighboring jurisdiction would warrant turning them over to the victim's family to punish. In general, a social peer or superior, virtually always a man-at-arms who acted for his household/clan/tribe/etc. carried out physical punishment. This man was the appointed "avenger." If the criminal were a soldier himself, you would send a better soldier (higher ranking) with helpers.

Virtually every man was trained to fight some as a conscript. Sparring was a form of sport, and Hebrew unarmed fighting was mostly wrestling. Men who got into a fracas would typically resort to wrestling, not punching, kicking or using weapons. They were expected to understand by custom that trying to kill someone was generally forbidden. Just wear him down and make him surrender. That was usually the end of the matter.

Thus, this passage begins with a warning about using punches or convenient weapons. Once you take that path, the liability rises steeply – compensation for lost time or execution for killing. God makes a special point about the difference between winning a fight and starting one, particularly in terms of killing. Most fights arise from genuine disagreements, and if you happen to kill your opponent, you can flee to a City of Refuge away from the avenger, and wait for your case to make its way through the appeals system. But if you harbor hatred for your covenant brother or sister, you are already dead in your heart, so it's likely your body will soon follow because you would act on that hatred and get into trouble. In that case, even the most extreme refuge of taking hold of the horns of an altar – normally sacred where violence of any kind is forbidden – cannot protect you. The avenger can drag you off the altar and execute you.

On the one hand, punitive beatings were justly performed with a rod, though typically not so heavy as a staff, but more like a long flexible stick or section of cane. On the other hand, it didn't matter much if you fail to restrain yourself and kill your bondservant. In such a case, the servant's kin can appoint an avenger to execute the master. If it takes the servant a while to die, then the bondservant's family cannot appoint an avenger. The man loses his investment, though, and can't reclaim the monetary loss from the servant's kin.

If two men are tussling and accidentally cause the spontaneous premature birth of a pregnant bystander, the minimum penalty is whatever the father of the child demands, up to the amount agreed to between a pair of judges, one representing each of the two parties. For any actual harm, it's the old *Lex Talionis*.

Beating a servant so that he/she loses an eye or tooth dissolves the bond. Eyes are obvious, but the issue with teeth is that there was no dentistry to speak of in those days. People would lose enough teeth all too soon in their lives simply from aging.

Obviously we see that it's taken for granted that people will fight some. The idea was to keep it within boundaries that would promote *shalom* (AKA social stability). There were rules in place to help guide, and if someone can't learn to restrain themselves before they get involved, they are already a threat to *shalom*.

Exodus 22:1-15

We should keep in mind that this summary of case law is not meant to be a compendium, but a sample of rulings that would indicate something of how God as sovereign views justice. These

rulings indicate the moral character of God. Thus, a wise heart could extrapolate a great deal from this sampling of decisions. This is how God expects His people to treat each other. These rulings assume that the people involved are kinfolks.

If someone steals livestock, and it can be proved, the thief owes the original owner four sheep for one, or five oxen for one. How he pays that is another matter; he owes it. Thieves typically broke in by digging through a wall, either of clay and lath, or of mud over stones. Doing so at night, the thief is fair game if the panicked residents defending themselves in darkness kill him. However, being caught in daylight, it's more reasonable to expect folks to wrestle and take him into custody. If they fail, they should have at least a good chance of identifying him. Once caught, he has to repay whatever the value of what was taken. If he is poor, he can be sold on a servant bond to repay the debt.

If what he stole was an animal, and it is found alive in his custody, he shall repay double. This is rather like our modern "grand theft" in that animals were typically the most valuable things people owned in that day and time, in terms of how useful it was in keeping them alive. We get the image that it's only slightly less valuable than a human. They weren't as accountable as humans, but still pretty valuable. So anyone who fails to control his livestock, so that they graze someone else's crops, shall repay with the best of his own crops. This implies that the victim gets to choose what pleases him in like amount, one for one value.

It was common in those days to burn the stubble of a harvested field. Piled stones pulled from the fields separated most fields from each other; in the stone piles thorns and other things grew wild. Since harvest was a dry season, this weed patch would also be dry, and might catch fire and spread to someone else's field. If the adjacent field still had unharvested crops, or the harvest is still stacked in the field, it could be a disaster for the neighbor. Whoever started this fire without keeping it under control is liable for the loss.

There were no safe deposit boxes in those days. It was a common courtesy to accept your neighbor's valuables for safekeeping when the owner had to be away from home for a while. Anyone paying attention to the affairs of their neighbors, as cousins typically did, would know about such deposits. It might tempt a thief to try stealing it, since it's all neatly packed. If caught, the thief has to pay double, on the principle that his act was predatory, not just a crime of opportunity. If the thief isn't caught, the two shall appear before the local judge, who will try to determine whether the trustee had any involvement in the crime. For example, did he make it easy for the thief by pretending he knew nothing about it?

For something like this involving trust and fraud, the standard ruling was to repay double. Again, it was a predatory crime. However, property with feet to move on its own was a different story. Domestic animals can wander off, get eaten, or frightened and run away. In such cases, the trustee can make an oath before God of his innocence. This is essentially calling a conditional curse down upon oneself. With such an oath, the victim of loss is restricted from seeking any further redress. That kind of stuff could have happened while the animal was still in his own custody.

But if this animal was actually stolen, implying that there is some evidence the trustee didn't take reasonable care to guard against such theft, then he has to repay the value of the animal. If he can prove that a natural predator (dogs, lions and bears did roam that land) killed the animal, then the trustee was not accountable. The victim would have to "blame" God in that case.

Borrowing an animal, typically for plowing or bearing some other load, made the borrower liable for the animal's health and safety. If the owner of the animal came along, this implies the owner was being paid for it. Any losses for a hired animal were the owner's problem, but he also need not come up with another animal to fulfill the contract.

All of this makes good sense for kinfolks dealing with each other. It all assumes that these people care about each other's welfare, and aren't looking for an excuse to exploit each other. It also deals with the reality that your own blood kin may not be the finest people in this fallen world.

Exodus 22:16-31

A major concept in Biblical Law is ritual defilement. There are certain things that make individuals defiled, but there are other things that make the whole community defiled. The secret sin of Achan in hiding plunder in his tent defiled the whole nation and removed their divine covering (Joshua 7). Without that covering mercy from God, the full weight of our fallen nature falls upon us. In a covenant community, it afflicts everyone. There are things the community of faith must not tolerate, lest it destroy their peace with God (*shalom*).

Casual sex is forbidden. In this case, if a man seduces any woman who isn't already engaged to another man, her consent does not make it okay. He must pay the bridal dowry and give her the status as his wife. If the father of the girl refuses to give her up, the man still must pay the bride price. Granted, this complicates things for that girl's future, but you have to realize that seduction is a threat to the moral fabric of the community. This man is a sexual predator.

You'll hear hundreds of disputes about what the Hebrew term translated as "sorceress" refers to here. It does matter that the Greek translation is the root of our term "pharmacy" – it has to do with herbs and chemicals. There are all sorts of proper uses for herbal remedies in Scripture, so that's not the point here. It's that murky combination of idolatry and seeking powers not granted by God. The simplest meaning of this word is someone who abuses herbs and chemicals, and in those ancient times, it was typically believed that getting high was a means of contacting spirits. In our terms today, it's related to using substances to breach your internal moral boundaries or messing with demons; it's a form of psychic burglary. You are touching a part of yourself only God can reveal when He's ready. Someone in that ancient covenant community who sought out spirits by any means was in reality conjuring demons, regardless of what they may have thought they were doing.

Bestiality was frequently associated with idolatry, as well. It doesn't matter what the rituals are; messing around with pagan deities is *de facto* provoking demons and bringing their perverting and defiling influence into the covenant community.

Looking for an excuse to oppress someone was a defiling predation. If they weren't covenant family, you didn't have to offer them privileges, but neither could you harass them. As long as they are peaceful within the covenant community, treat them as visitors. The same goes with widows and orphans who didn't have a patron to protect them. These folks are your covenant family; don't make their lives any harder than life already is. God will hear their cry and punish your whole community, so it's on the community to reach out and protect them.

You cannot charge interest on survival loans. Elsewhere God says you *shall* lend to your poverty-stricken kinfolk, so get used to taking small losses like that. God will prosper you and more than make up for it; this is implied. Even during the summer season, nights can be pretty

cool in Palestine, so you can't take someone's cloak as loan collateral and keep it overnight. The implication is that you let them sleep in it and then return it the next day back into collateral holding.

You shall never allow people in your covenant community to treat Jehovah as if He didn't matter, and don't even try calling down curses on those whom God puts in authority over you. Is it any wonder that so many nations today are under God's wrath? These things provoke nature itself to reject you.

The First Fruits belong to God; He is your sovereign and this is the tax He collects. He makes life possible, so everything comes from His hand. It won't kill you to surrender that first usable tenth to Him. In the case of animals, let them nurse seven days, and on the eighth offer them up. If nothing else, this makes it easier to milk the mother.

Don't snack on carrion, even if it was one of your prized herd animals. Move the carcass to a place where carrion eaters will take care of it. Leave it for the wild dogs to clean up. This is part of what makes dogs defiling and repulsive to the community, so don't join them.

Exodus 23:1-9

Scripture never says that all are equal. It does say that justice is justice regardless of who is involved. Some things are wrong in themselves. It's not a question of the person standing before the court, but of you standing before God. Doing justice is in your own best interest, and is your duty before your Creator. Keep in mind that this whole thing is a covenant, and this is Covenant Law for a Covenant Nation.

Almost everyone you encounter in a covenant nation like ancient Israel would be your fellow Israeli, and quite likely some cousin. How does one regard a kinsman as an enemy without them being such a horrific criminal that the whole community at the very least ostracizes them? Don't be petty. The Covenant made allowances for dealing with really evil people, but don't seek private revenge for wrongs done to you. God is the One who chose your relatives; so seek peace with Him about your troubles with difficult relatives. There are things you have to guard on everyone's behalf for you to receive any part of it. The covenant is its own reward; obeying the Law is a blessing in itself.

Abraham was to all appearances an exceedingly well-educated man, equal to any PhD today, with many decades of experience using that education. While he may have lacked in Canaan Land the educational resources available to him back home in the Akkadian Empire, he didn't lack the means to transmit his vast knowledge to his children and grandchildren. It would have been his duty to educate his progeny. This was a mark of nobility. Yet, we know for certain that this kind of nobility would only last for a few generations before we start to see whole clans begin falling behind on it. Not everyone has the temperament and aptitude for a solid education, any more than everyone would be a hard worker. These human failings could easily be transmitted to succeeding generations. It's natural the rot spreads quicker than noble character.

Moses shares with Israel the revelation of God some 600 years after Abraham. The Covenant made some effort to make up for this natural disparity by warning people not to surrender to wild superstition. Given the stern warning not to let your community slip away from *shalom*, and the assertion that these people were a chosen nation, it's easy to imagine whole villages of kinfolks who would become overly guarded in their simplistic reading of the Law. So this

section begins with a warning to be very careful about such things.

They were to guard against rumors and idle gossip. The Hebrew language could be quite expressive and dramatic, so it would be too easy for Israelis to blow something small out of proportion. They are warned here not to look for an excuse to ruin the life of someone they didn't like. Don't follow the stampeding herd. If just one or two sensible people in every village took the time to double-check stories going around, it should be enough to prevent injustice. So Moses encourages everyone to seek being a fount of justice. In particular, Moses warns them to show no partiality to someone who is an underdog for any reason. This implies not showing preference for the big shots, either.

If a domestic animal goes astray, capture and return it to the owner. If it belongs to someone you regard as an enemy, don't seek backdoor justice by letting it go, or driving it farther away. Settle your squabbles some other way, but treat those animals as God's property merely on loan to the owner. If an animal is in distress, it won't matter if the owner hates you; help him and his animal. Be a better person by living justly.

In verse 6, Moses uses a word specifically referring to someone who is dependent on others to survive, which is different from the term ("underdog") used in the verses above. Don't prey on someone who has no champion to defend him, because God will be his champion. You'll see this over and over again throughout Scripture. Seek divine justice in all things. Don't let someone die because of political pressure and social convenience. The whole idea of social stability is not from enforced conformity, but it comes from seeking peace with God. Refuse bribes on principle. Be suspicious of folks trying to influence you against your heart.

And the same goes for protecting outsiders to the Covenant. Moses reminds the people that they were once aliens and suffered pretty bad abuse simply because they weren't part of the native population in Egypt. It was unjust then; don't pretend it is suddenly okay now that you are the insiders. Show mercy to those who mean you no harm.

Exodus 23:10-18

A primary element in Creation is the cycle of life. The whole point of the Seven Days of Creation narrative was to mark this very thing. God wove the seven-day cycle into the fabric of reality. All of our human existence, even before the Fall, consisted of cycles. After the Fall, with the insertion of mortality, it became critical to mark the cycle of the year, as well as the seven day cycle.

God even instituted a Sabbath Year observance. He makes it clear that this has to do with the rhythm of how Creation works. Just as the Sabbath Day belongs to God, so does this Sabbath Year; it's an offering in which His covenant people must trust Him to provide for them while the land can rest and recover. They would eat the wild produce instead. To carry the symbolism further, this observance is a gift to the needy, encouraging them to harvest any volunteer crops. And what they don't use becomes a gift to the natural world. This applies to every element of cultivation.

The Lord ties this to the seven-day cycle. Further, God notes that a major point here is letting your household servants and animals take a break. God rested on that day, so should all Creation. This is in our best interest; it makes us consistent with reality itself. In all of these observances, no one should so much as mention the name of other gods. There is only one God, but more to the point, there was only one God Israel had to concern themselves with, and He

wasn't going to share.

Related to all of this was the cycle of feasts. Here God mentions the three big feasts:

- **Unleavened Bread:** (7 days following Passover) 14-20 Abib (later called Nisan); late March for us
- **Firstfruits:** (end of Unleavened Bread) 21 Abib; early April
- **Ingathering:** (Tabernacles) 15-21 Tishri; early October

Unleavened Bread should be obvious, as it commences with Passover, the single celebration yearly that reminds Israel of their national birth and redemption. They were redeemed from slavery to become the feudal property of God as His own adopted family. It was largely symbolic to destroy all the yeast they had been keeping as sourdough during the year, so they could start with a fresh culture after this feast.

Notice the comment about not appearing before God empty-handed. This is not a reference to offerings, but to the feast they would share with God in His Presence. Nobody will leave hungry. That means if anyone is in poverty, others will be obliged to adopt them temporarily and make sure they partake of the feast. Typically this would be one's nearest kin. It points out how the survival of everyone under the Covenant is an obligation laid on the nation as a whole, who should be grateful for their redemption.

Firstfruits comes right after the end of Unleavened Bread. It has a separate purpose, but it quickly became the practice for folks coming to the Temple for Passover/Unleavened Bread to stick around until it was all finished. Then they would go home and harvest the various crops coming ripe across the balance of spring and through the summer. In the fall, they would come back for another round of holy day observances. But Trumpets and the Day of Atonement didn't require every man to appear, only the last observance, which was the Ingathering, AKA Tabernacles. Notice that it is the Feasts that become the most sacred in terms of mandatory attendance. The emphasis is on joyfully celebrating the goodness of their God.

By the way, for the record, the definition of "males" required to attend would exclude those too old or otherwise disabled, and included only those who were past their bar-Mitzvah. The Sons of the Covenant had to honor the Covenant. They should have been quite eager to do so, as it was all counted as a high privilege.

Never make a blood offering with leaven, said the Lord. This is unique to Israel in history. No other nation or religion had this symbol. It reminded them how they fled Egyptian slavery by God's strong hand of deliverance. The nation marched out at dawn without time to let their bread rise and bake in the morning. The other item was ensuring that the meat didn't have time to rot overnight. What wasn't eaten by bedtime must be burned in the fire. It symbolizes both a readiness to march at God's command and the purity of nothing rotten, same as the business with leaven.

God restates the duty of giving Him the first of all agricultural produce. It's a permanent debt we owe to God so long as we live on this earth. We owe our very lives to Him, so the prohibition against boiling a kid in its mother's milk makes perfect sense. As I understand it, the kid was dropped alive in that boiling milk. It was a very common pagan fertility ritual in which one would consume a little of the resulting soupy milk, and then sprinkle it on one's agricultural resources. This is consistent with the general prohibition against consuming anything with blood in it. God is not like other deities and won't tolerate being treated that way. All blood is either an offering to Him, or it's evidence of deep moral depravity that cries out against us.

Exodus 23:20-33

This passage is steeped in symbolism and cultural significance. It's very easy to miss what's important here.

What we have covered in these few chapters starting with the Ten Commandments is a summary of things they should have already known. This is before Moses climbed up the Mountain of God to spend forty days receiving a much larger body of revelation and clarification of ancient legends. The Covenant will get far more specific later, but this much was already a long standing body of custom and moral guidance.

Before Moses disappears, they are given a glimpse of where they are headed. They are going back to claim the homeland that God promises to give them as descendants of Abraham. While the summary up to now were things Abraham would have been able to teach his household, this is something fresh. God sketches out for them how this covenant will work for them. This is the first fruits of divine blessings promised to those who are faithful to their divine Sovereign.

He first promises to grant a token of His divine Presence in the form of an angel. The word for "angel" is not that precise; it refers to a messenger from Heaven. But this messenger is the angel who carries the name of God – literally, the standard bearer, the one whose flag signals the title and authority of the Creator. This standard always stood outside the ruler's tent, his royal court and his personal household. The primary manifestation of this standard bearer was the pillar of cloud and fire that went before the nation on the march.

The people had already shown the fear of coming too close to God's divine Presence, so they were ordered to obey this angelic being as they would God's own voice. His mission was to relay communications, not to serve as a priest. Thus, he would offer no tolerance for insubordination. If they disputed anything he said, it would be counted as rebellion. They would then have to come back into the terrifying Presence to make amends.

The nation had already heard during their time back in Egypt who those nations were that lived in the Promised Land. These nations listed here were vassal kingdoms of Egypt. With all that God had done to destroy the Egyptian army and such, we can understand why these vassal kingdoms in Canaan sent so many letters back to Egypt whining about the invading Israelis, and there was no answer. God intended to lead His nation into that land and displace the current residents. Israel was to go in and kick everyone out, or destroy them if they wouldn't leave, and begin to occupy the land.

God notes that it will be worse than a storm of wasps, as far as the resident nations were concerned. The cleansing would be quite thorough, given that all of these nations were devoted to all kinds of foreign idols. Israel generally wasn't allowed to simply occupy the existing cities and towns, because they were defiled by that idolatry. Thus, they had to come in, wipe it all out, and start over from scratch. Given the monumental size of the task, God would ensure that His people would conquer slowly, little by little. He wanted them to have time to really take full control.

If all the current residents up and left all at once, the cities and agricultural lands would go wild and become infested with dangerous animals. At that time, there were bears, lions, feral dogs like hyenas, not to mention poisonous snakes and a host of biting insects. The unproductive wild plants would fill the agricultural clearings, and the wells would collapse or become filled with dust. Thus, God wants them to prepare for the long haul. Be ready to push out the

idolaters little by little. But God warns them to be sure that they must do this job without fail. Otherwise, the pagan presence would serve as a compromising temptation. Jehovah would not tolerate any kind of adultery from His bride nation.

If they are faithful, then they could not fail to seize the entire Promised Land. God would become the Enemy of their enemies. Further, they would never run short of sustenance. They would be safe from plagues and threats. There would be no barren wombs and everyone could expect to live to a ripe old age. This is the standard summary of what *shalom* implies, the signs of peace with God.

This is a parable of how things work when people embrace Biblical Law. We must conquer the battleground of our own souls with righteous commitment. We drive out our demons little by little until we can occupy our lives with God's glory and His peace.

Exodus 24

This chapter is critical to understand the Covenant and how God held Israel accountable. Keep in mind that the Hebrew language isn't very good at description, and translations into English vary widely on this chapter. It's difficult to get an image of what happened here without referring back to movies, and most of them were based on very poor scholarship.

The previous chapters we've looked at were one long monologue between God and Moses. He then came back and related all of it to the nation. Try to understand that even if it were only a few thousand bodies, this wasn't a speech that touched everyone's ears. Rather, the leadership of each tribe was clustered close enough to hear it, and they related what they heard to their tribes, but we can't be sure the exact procedure and how long it may have taken. This was supposed to be at least 250,000 military aged men alone, not to mention all their families back among the tents. The whole nation was assembled and arranged in martial order, rather like their version of a military parade. At any rate, Moses wrote all of this down so that folks could copy it and review it later. They all agreed to it verbally, which was then binding on them.

The Lord called up Moses and his immediate ceremonial staff: Aaron as Chief Priest and the two primary senior priests, his elder sons Nadab and Abihu. Also invited were the ranking Seventy Elders Council, composed of men from the various Twelve Tribes. This was rather analogous to an emperor calling a vassal king into His court; this would be a vassal king's retinue. In the case of the priests, it would brand them with an unmistakable sense of divine Presence and awe to breathe life into their service. For the elders, it was rather like them witnessing things first hand so they can insure that the rest of the nation knows this is not some imaginary vision of a crazy man, nor a smoke and mirrors show.

This tableau wasn't on a flat plain. The approach to every mountain in that part of the world is hilly, with ridges cut by seasonal water courses (*wadi*). Early the next morning, Moses would have hiked up on a suitable ridge in easy view of the crowds, and built an altar according to the ancient traditions he already cited. He also erected a stone pillar for each of the tribes. All of this was likely near the same place Moses stood to receive the initial outline of the Covenant. We note in passing that Moses didn't perform this labor with his own hands; there would have been high ranking men to handle this for him, with him clearly in charge.

Next, he called for younger adult men chosen by each tribe as representatives, and they brought collected offerings. The offerings would have already been in hand among the tribes, but the ritual called for the men to go and appear to solicit these offerings. Mentioned prominently was

a number of oxen. The point was the necessary symbolism of the blood drained from their bodies. Half the blood of each animal was splattered on the altar to sanctify it. The other half was collected in basins. Again, the priests on hand would have performed the actual work. Moses read the current iteration of the Covenant to the crowd. Once more, they all verbally agreed to it through their leaders. In response, Moses splattered the blood from the basins in wide arcs over the front of the crowd, perhaps walking part way through the rest of the crowd doing the same thing. It's almost certain he had the help of Aaron and his sons in this, but it was customary in Hebrew writing that you understand this without having to state it pedantically.

After all of this ritual observance of confirming the Covenant, Moses gathered the previously mentioned entourage and climbed a ways up the side of the mountain. There, God gave them a vision, a manifestation of His Presence that they would recognize. He sat on a throne with a green colored pavement as His feet. They could see right through this pavement to whatever was underneath. There's just too much symbolism here to summarize, but what matters most is that they would have been suitably impressed that this was no mere human. This whole scene was burned into their minds, and not only did they not die from being in His holy Presence, but they were allowed to eat a meal symbolizing being at peace with this, their new Emperor.

God commanded Moses to approach more closely so that he could receive in his hands tablets of thin slabs of stone with writing that symbolized the Covenant. Not previously noted was the presence of Joshua, but that's not unusual in their culture. Joshua held the same place as Moses' shield bearer; this was his understudy and presumed successor. Every man of importance had at least one younger fellow hanging around as his apprentice, even if they weren't mentioned in the text. You can bet almost every man in his entourage up on the mountain had one or more attendants, too. In this case, the identity of Joshua is important, as he went right along behind Moses up to the throne of God. Turning back to the elders, Moses told them to wait, as this was going to take a long time. He left instructions on whom they should trust if anything came up: Aaron who could get a word from God, and Hur as a reliable judge. Again, we see a man named who wasn't previously mentioned. This is normal.

Moses ascended higher (with Joshua in tow) into the cloud covering the top of the mountain. The two men were there fasting for a week before God called to Moses again. God manifested Himself again, this time as a fire consuming the top part of the mountain, and it was visible to the nation below. Just as a minor note, to these ancient people, all glowing was related to fire. They had no other source of light, so everything that was alight was "fire" to them. What you and I might think of it is impossible to guess, but a "consuming fire" indicates flames of some sort with smoke to match. In this case it would probably look like a volcano without the ash raining down or magma flowing down the sides. It was into this cloud of smoke that Moses (and Joshua) climbed even farther up. They stayed up there for "forty days and nights" – a Hebrew expression meaning longer than a month, but not precisely forty.

Exodus 31:12-18

We skip over the detailed description of the Tabernacle, priestly rituals and vestments, and related matters. They are a grand archeological resource, helping us envision things, but not of any great essence in understanding the implications of Biblical Law as a whole.

To some degree, we might almost say the same thing about the Sabbath Observance. However, the symbolism here is more deeply woven into the very fabric of Creation itself. But before we dig into that, let us review critical statements Paul made regarding how we translate the

Sabbath Law into the service of Christ:

So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. (Colossians 2:16-17)

The whole chapter there is Paul warning against legalism, which is using the Law as a club to make others miserable. There is no virtue in that. He also warns against trusting in logic and reason, but emphasizes trusting your personal convictions.

One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. (Romans 14:5)

Same story, but in more detail, Paul obliterates the legalistic position regarding Sabbath observance and other holy days, along with Kosher and similar matters. He uses the Greek word *nous*, translated as "mind," but in this context meaning something akin to a sure knowledge of your own convictions.

Finally, in Hebrews 3-4, the author argues that the whole point behind the Sabbath was to symbolize the rest God promised, in that *Sabbath* is from the Hebrew root for "rest." God created all things in six days and rested on the seventh, establishing the pattern for us. Israel never actually got to that rest, so the Son fulfilled the meaning of the Law for them, and for us. If we follow Him with a commitment from the heart, we cannot fail to enter God's rest.

This is how we understand this passage in Exodus 31. It's a divine privilege to take off one day in seven and still be assured that everything will be fine. Israel could give that day back to God and still prosper. They could devote that day to contemplation and renewal of their personal commitment to Jehovah as Lord. Meanwhile, they could bless the Lord by giving everyone else a break by making no material demands on them. Slow down and take care of your own personal needs that day.

The whole point of this passage is to emphasize that Israel must take this command very seriously. It's a symbol of the Covenant itself and the promises to future generations. This is a call to trust the Lord to keep His promises, letting faith overrule the human logic based on fear and distrust.

Exodus 32

We take a break from study of the content of the Covenant and examine some historical context, in that the Covenant almost didn't happen.

The story itself is familiar to most of us. Moses was communing with God on Mount Sinai while the nation below became impatient. For all they could tell, Moses went up in that cloud and died. His brother Aaron was recognized as the spokesman, while Moses himself seldom actually spoke in public. Again, get used to the idea that the narrative gives credit for actions to the people who commanded things, but didn't literally put their hands to the work. Since Aaron was the recognized vocal agent and High Priest, they demanded that he come up with something they could recognize as a deity so they could get back on the march toward Canaan Land.

We can't estimate how much gold Aaron received, but the symbolism of taking earrings is that the people agreed beforehand to give their "ears" (obedient attention) to this deity. The idol probably wasn't all that large, perhaps just visible if held aloft, and shiny because it was formed from freshly molten gold. Most likely it was cast by making a model of clay (thus, the engraving

tool), and covering it with a thin layer of molten gold, which was then polished.

The idea typical for the Ancient Near East would not be worshipping the calf itself, but that the invisible deity would be riding on the calf, though we might think of it as a young bull as the image of strength. This was quite common among Semitic nations with Mesopotamian roots, and the phrasing of the declaration distinguishes their deity from the ones more common among Egyptians. "Our god defeated the Egyptian gods!" This is better than wallowing in Egyptian slavery, but not by much.

However, Aaron connected this symbol with Jehovah's name, and defiled the name with pagan rituals typically associated with the degrading cults of Canaan. They made offerings on their makeshift altar, and then feasted and "got up to play." This almost certainly refers to drunken nude dancing. This is what the text means by referring to making them a laughingstock before their enemies. Most nomadic Semite tribes would have been more sober in their worship rituals, and this made Israel appear to be no morally better than the folks in the Land of Canaan where they were supposed to root out corrupt religious practices. You can bet scouts from their enemies were around them, spying on all of this.

So God broke off this sweet communion with Moses and ordered him to stand aside while He destroyed them. He would start fresh with the family of Moses and make a new tribe. Moses prayed on their behalf, suggesting that it was a little too late for that. After wiping out Egypt to deliver Israel, how would it look for the name of Jehovah if He made it seem like He lured them into the desert to destroy them? Yes, they were stiff-necked indeed, but that's exactly the kind of problem revelation was supposed to solve. Moses implored God to keep His promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

God relented and Moses went down to clean up the mess. He bore two slabs of slate with detailed fine writing by God's own finger on both sides. As they approached the camp, Joshua heard a racket that made him think there was a battle. Moses spoke in a prophetic verse that it was neither victory nor defeat that caused such a tumult, but fools partying in the desert. When they came down upon the scene, Moses couldn't restrain himself. He shattered the two stone tablets to symbolize that they had already broken the covenant they had not yet officially received.

First he fussed with his brother, Aaron. The latter gave a lame excuse. Moses called for anyone who might have not yet caved into temptation. Of course, his own tribe was with him; they had not yet stripped naked and indulged in this orgy. The command they received is not easily translated into English. What it amounts to is sending armed men to execute people acting out the most egregious displays of immorality. Several thousand men were killed that way. They would have all been unarmed, since they were naked, and too drunk to resist.

Please don't envision long steel swords flashing in the afternoon sun. These would have been bronze weapons, not longer than a man's forearm, a big dagger. That mixture of copper and tin would have been too brittle for anything larger. The slaughter was a matter of grabbing a man, often by his beard, and stabbing his midriff. It would have been pretty messy.

When the armed Levites returned, Moses ordered everyone to observe sober mourning rituals as previously commanded in the ritual law. Whatever they were doing, it wasn't Jehovah they had been celebrating. The next day as they fasted and mourned, Moses returned to the clouds on the mountain and begged with God to spare the nation.

The Lord's answer was quite pointed: Those who defy Him will receive their individual justice.

The implication is that He would judge by what's in their hearts, and the punishment would match the sin. He ordered Moses to take the lead again and expect to see an angelic presence, but that when God came to visit, it would mean wrath. They couldn't afford to have God leading them in person on a regular basis. For some time after this incident, a portion of the people suffered various kinds of plagues.

Leviticus 17

We pass over a great deal of ceremonial detail that could not apply to any other context but Ancient Israel. The nature of our study here is to understand the background of the Law in terms of how it would apply to us today. This chapter follows upon the instructions for the Day of Atonement, and stands in the context of making offerings. However, we find here an eternal divine principle of how God demands respect for His Creation.

Thus, the first six verses refer to any food that is ritually consumed in the Presence of Jehovah, in the sense of a shared meal declaring peace with God. This does not refer to common food preparation. It would be impossible for the priesthood to handle overseeing a ritual slaughter every day of the year for several hundred thousand households. This is for those special times of celebration. The idea is that bringing the dead carcass to the Temple is an insult to the Lord. You can't treat a special meal in the Divine Presence the same as any other meal. The blood must be poured out before Him, and the entrails and fatty parts offered on the altar.

But then the commandment makes a particular point of warning that Jehovah is the only deity Israel serves. God refers to making sacrifices to goats, and it is often rightly translated as "demons" because it's a reference to the goat idols some Israelis had picked up in Egypt. We know from rabbinical traditions that some small minority of the nation carried idols throughout the Exodus, and this was the source of much trouble. What the text here says is that, if they get caught, they can be executed ("cut off").

Next comes something that applies to all of humanity until the End of All Things: You shall not consume the blood of animals. Even in the daily food preparation at home, there must be a reverence toward God and His Creation by draining the blood carefully before any further processing of the carcass. God notes that this law applies to every human on the planet, and we see that the Apostles in Acts 15 take it that way.

If nothing else, we should show reverence that one of God's creatures must sacrifice its life for our survival. The whole point of the ritual law that we skipped over at this point is the symbolism of bloodshed to mark the price of sin. Sin kills; God allows us to use the blood of proxies to cover our sins. Adam and Eve covered their nakedness with animal skins, meaning animals died to protect them after the Fall. Eating meat is optional, but shedding blood is not. If you do eat meat, it has to be done properly.

Furthermore, that blood should ideally be shed at your own hands. God makes one small allowance for eating meat from animals you didn't kill yourself (or someone in your family killed). Presumably, you're going to make sure it is bled before eating it. If you eat it, then you have touched a carcass. Have respect for life by noting that you are ceremonially unclean among human company until the next day (Hebrew days started at nightfall). Consider that the folks most likely to eat what we might jokingly call "road kill" would be people too poor to own or buy animals they could slaughter.

In modern times, virtually no one kills their own meat. While we no longer face the rituals that

applied to Israel, we can easily understand how the modern food industry often ignores the thrust of this commandment. The whole idea is not the rules; God realizes that we don't always have too many options. Our reverence for life is the issue, not the Kosher Law. Jesus made that point, and Peter's housetop experience in Joppa leaves no doubt. We don't bless the food, we bless the God who provides it.

Leviticus 18

This will not be a typical Bible lesson. On the one hand, the chapter itself is pretty easy to summarize, but one issue is raised that requires a lot of background.

The chapter begins with the Lord giving the context for what follows: Don't act like the pagan nations. In particular, this refers to the influences of Egypt where they lived for several centuries, or the Canaanites whose land they were invading. Keep in mind that the Lord has said over and over that the issue with the Canaanites was not the people, but their hideous religious practices. The cities Joshua attacked later were a select group of major cult centers; he was never commissioned to destroy every town. Thus, Israel should have expected some of the local population to continue as conquered subject nations, while Israel took over the ownership of the land promised to Abraham.

So the point in this chapter is to avoid acting like the pagan peoples to whom Israel was routinely exposed. The Egyptians had no problem with incestuous marriages, so the rules here are pretty clear about all the different ways one could violate this taboo, with polygamy, etc. It has to do with what constitutes kinship too close for sexual contact, and presumably marriage. This is where we get our Western notion of "kissing cousin" – anyone who is at least three times removed (third cousin). They are considered safe from this regulation.

Notice that under normal circumstances, a man cannot touch a brother's wife, but the exception not mentioned here is when his brother dies without heirs. Then a man must marry his brother's widow and raise up heirs in that brother's name. Keep it in focus here: This is not simply a matter of marriage and kinship, but each of these negative examples arises from pagan practices either in Egypt or Canaan.

Thus, we come to verse 19 which is often misunderstood and taken out of that context. In order to explain this, we have to bring in a lot of context. My primary source is "Laws of Niddah in Leviticus 15."¹ You can probably find this elsewhere. Our biggest problem is that Orthodox Judaism has made a huge confusing mess out of the issue of women's menstruation. Sadly, too many Christians pay no attention to Jesus and His condemnation of Jewish folly and legalism, so many church teachings are based on this crazy notion that Judaism is an accurate reflection of the Covenant. It is not. The reference here is not simply a woman's monthly discomfort, but to a pagan ritual act.

That reference makes note of Leviticus 15 and 20, where the wider issue of menstruation is raised as a matter of ritual purity. It also mentions vaginal hemorrhage, which is handled differently, a much stricter matter. Rabbinical tradition, in yet another attempt to hedge about the Law, as if it needs some kind of extreme protection, refuses to distinguish the two and treats them both as hemorrhage, which is totally unfair to the woman and hard on marriages.

Under routine menstruation, a woman is ritually impure for seven days. All that means is that

¹ <https://www.nehemiaswall.com/laws-niddah-leviticus-15>

she cannot enter the Temple grounds. As long as she is nowhere near the Temple, it's no big deal. If her husband lies in the same bed or sits on the same chair during those seven days, he must bathe and wait until sundown to enter the Temple. Archaeologists have found a ring of pools around the Temple Mount. A man entering Jerusalem and headed for the Temple could stop off and bathe at one of these pools and wait until sundown, and then enter the Temple the next day. A lot of men would play it safe and stop to bathe on the principle of some unwitting ritual impurity. This is where we get baptism, by the way.

If he actually had sex with her during her seven days, he had to wait out the week with her. Now, as long as he had no intention of entering the Temple, none of that ritual purity business mattered. That is, it didn't matter unless that sex act during her period was a pagan ritual act, something that was practiced in both Egypt and among the Canaanites. Then the both of them were liable to execution, or exile if they happened to escape. That's the point of the reference in this chapter here.

For those of us who follow the Messiah and King of the New Israel, the ritual purity issue means nothing. And it's hard to imagine even a Western Christian desiring to engage in any long forgotten pagan rituals. However, Paul made it clear that the issue of sex with near relatives, near both by blood and by marriage, is more than a matter of ancient heathen rituals (1 Corinthians 5). It violates Creation itself and threatens *shalom*.

Leviticus 19:1-17

This is one of the richest chapters in the Bible, showcasing a wide array of moral treasures. We can't cover it in one lesson, so we'll be here a while.

A fundamental expression of reverence for God is to revere one's elders, too. Don't get confused by this; the Hebrew people knew one's elders could be wrong about some things. It wasn't the intent to make anyone a slave of their elders, but to make one respectful even when it was impossible to do everything the elders demanded. Mind your manners, but obey the Lord. Along with that was the Sabbath observance – seven days without worship makes one week, and makes one morally weak, as well. These two items were easily the most prominent markers of devotion to Jehovah.

The concept of holiness in this context is devotion to the Lord, an undivided loyalty. Israel never had to worry about offending any other deities; Jehovah was the only God who could touch them. For that reason, they had no excuse at all to play the harlot with idols. Jehovah was a possessive God.

The whole point of a Peace Offering was to share a meal with God and His family. You took the animal to the Tabernacle/Temple, had it slaughtered by the priest, and the guts were offered on the altar to God. The rest was a shared meal with God's family. You were supposed to make a concerted effort to give away as much as you couldn't eat by yourself. Feed your own household, and then invite everyone you can find to come and get a serving, as well. In particular you should invite those who are poor. There shouldn't be any left after a couple of days eating and sharing.

This brings up the next point. Don't be hyper-efficient in your harvesting of crops. Make sure you or your servants are working hard enough to drop a little now and then. Don't cut all the way up into the corners, but leave some standing. Leave enough unharvested for your poor fellow Israelis to go help themselves. You don't have to invite them for supper, but you can

leave enough that they can work for it themselves. Treat it like an offering to God.

It should be obvious that you will be honest with your covenant brothers and sisters. Don't take their stuff for any reason. Don't hide pertinent facts when dealing with them and don't try to cheat them by deception. God is watching and knows what's in your heart.

And what kind of fool amuses himself by taking advantage of deaf and blind folks? The terminology refers to saying something nasty about a deaf person so everyone hearing can laugh, or tripping up the blind for the sake of comedy. There is no excuse for cruelty. If you can't bring yourself to help them, just let them be. Again, God is watching.

When it's your place to judge something, don't show favoritism to either the underdog or the powerful. What is just is in everyone's best interest. This is how we build *shalom* with God. Don't be a scandal-monger, slandering people behind their backs. Don't even tell funny stories without first finding out how the main character feels about the whole thing.

You must not hold a grudge against your own people. If they have offended you, clear the air with them. Get it off your chest, but don't let hatred fester in your heart if you can't just let it go. Give them a chance to repent. This is your family we are talking about here; if you love yourself, you can't hate them.

Keep your society stable.

Leviticus 19:19-37

We continue a laundry list of commandments that are designed to set Israel apart from other nations.

The business of mixing animals, crops and fabrics has provoked endless debate, even among Jewish scholars. Nowhere else in Scripture is this explained. The only obvious reason for this prohibition is that it represents pagan religious practices. This section of verses seems to address a lot of that sort of thing.

The penalty for adultery with a concubine is much lower, especially for the woman. She's not a free woman, but a servant or slave taken into the household as a concubine. Thus, she can be scourged if it appears she was too willing, and it's likely the man would be for sure, but he has the added penalty of a sin offering.

The prohibition against eating from fruit trees the first few years is a common practice today. So far as scholars can discern, it is simply good agricultural practice, since pruning is almost a necessity for the first few years to make the tree hardy and not drag its limbs on the ground. Some trees don't even produce for the first few years. The fourth year crop belongs wholly to God. Fifth and subsequent years, the Lord took a tithe from the first fruits. On the other hand, this prohibition had nothing to do with wild fruit, only cultivated trees.

The next few verses cover a range of idolatrous practices. Not eating blood is covered repeatedly because it was a vile pagan practice to seek magical powers from bloodshed. The term "divination" is a collection of dark practices that have to do with changing one's voice to indicate another being is speaking through them, while "soothsaying" refers to any number of practices based on reading the future, like astrology, for example. The odd beard trimming, scars and tattoos were all well known pagan practices. It wasn't the act, but the meaning behind it. It's too easy to forget that this passage is about idolatry.

One of the most hideous practices was ordering one's daughters to serve as temple prostitutes for a period prior to marriage. At least one religion demanded this as an annual sacrifice, when all women were encouraged to sell their bodies in exchange for offerings to the temple. The reaction to this is why genuine virginity is so prized by the Hebrew people. The people would have all they could do properly observing the Sabbath and treating the Tabernacle with respect; they didn't need the slavery of pagan practices.

It was common to find pagans who claimed to have contact with spirit beings. The "medium" refers to any number of practices, but typically a ventriloquist. It was silly hocus-pocus. Another more dangerous practice was actually a person cultivated by a particular demon as their "familiar spirit" who would manifest at times with supposed messages from the dead. Jehovah says this is all threats of moral defilement.

Stand or rise in the presence of elders as a sign of respect, because God will take it as an insult if you are disrespectful to them. Aside from certain rituals prescribed elsewhere, treat a peaceful Gentile resident in your lands as one of your own, with due care and consideration. In other words, don't drive them out. Give them a reason to revere your God. He reminds them not to act like the Egyptians did, enslaving Israel just because they were a convenient labor source. Don't cheat each other in commerce. Fall in love with honest measures, weights and scales.

All of this contributes to the image of what "holiness" means.

Leviticus 20

This is an austere chapter, enumerating a list of sins for which the death penalty is demanded. That would be hard to understand if you fail to realize that all of these represent pagan practices. The chapter begins and ends with a reference to idolatrous rituals, and everything in between is best understood as more of the same. Thus, it is not the acts in themselves that are so wrong, but that they are all associated with pagan practices that defile the nation and threaten covenant *shalom*.

Please note that the frequent comment "his blood shall be upon him" is a specific formula that forbids relatives of the guilty from seeking any blood vengeance rights. The perpetrator executed for any of these crimes against the Covenant was no victim, but brought on his own death.

Sacrificing children to Moloch involved building a brass oven in some likeness of the deity, with the arms as the focus of the heat. Once hot enough, a child was thrown alive into the arms and cooked to death. This is referred to as "passing children through the fire." For the most part, it was meant to curry Moloch's favor for predictable weather and a good harvest. That's bad enough, but the whole symbolism of giving children granted by Jehovah to some other deity was just beyond the pale. However, the failure to zealously prosecute those who commit this foul idolatry is considered equal to the sin itself, and thus the penalty is the same. The People of the Covenant are all equally charged with guarding the Covenant regardless how dear the life that was forfeited.

The various practices of divination are condemned yet again. The people are warned to commit themselves to a zeal for the Lord and prosecute the defiling idolatry wherever, whenever and however it rears its demonic head. Cursing one's parents was another foul act of idolatry, since there was no ritual for that under the Covenant. It was *de facto* a pagan practice that involved consorting with demons.

The list of forbidden sexual relations is not new at this point. Most of them were part of Egyptian religious practices. Again, the reference to sex during a woman's menstruation is not a mere sex act, as we noted in a previous lesson, but refers to a pagan practice meant to conjure power from blood. The mention of burning with fire was not a means of execution, but what happens to the bodies after they are dead from stoning. Also, "they shall be childless" is a reference to execution well before the woman can give birth. If her pregnancy is the evidence that brings on the charge, she is to be executed before giving birth, because the child is defiled.

God depicts the land – the natural world – as intolerant of these filthy pagan practices. The land itself would facilitate the slaughter of the degraded Canaanites living there, and it would do the same to Israel by someone else. Holiness meant taking seriously the heart-led way of sensing moral danger, and these commandments would set a baseline for understanding what moral danger looked like. Thus, anyone who practices any idolatrous rituals for any reason must be stoned to death.

Leviticus 24:10-23

We skip over some ritual law that does not apply to us today, except to note that rituals are meant to stir the consciousness of our need for redemption.

The narrative turns to a story about a man whose loyalty to the Covenant is obviously questionable. His mother was Israeli, but his father was Egyptian. They hadn't been out of Egypt all that long, and we can guess that he came along on the Exodus most likely because he was expelled from his father's homeland at that time. Pharaoh kicked out a bunch of folks along with Israel, and many of them hung with the nation because they had nothing better to do. At any rate, the man's sense of identity was divided, and during a bad moment tussling with an Israeli, he let his passions overload his mouth.

Blasphemy is defined as insulting Jehovah, diminishing His glory. Most often it takes the form of either pulling God down to a human level, or elevating some human to a divine level. So, for example, today's symbolic painting of angel wings on a picture of a human is borderline blasphemous. Either way, blasphemy is an attack on God's unique position as Creator, suggesting He isn't who He claims to be. We aren't given the half-Egyptian man's actual outburst, but we can guess it was designed to denigrate the Israeli man as inferior against the racial superiority of the half-Egyptian man. He could have said all kinds of things and not crossed the line.

Whatever he said was also an insult to Jehovah, under whose dominion this half-breed was living. Anyone living among the Israelis would have been required to respect the nation's sovereign had he been a human, so how could it be less so when their ruler and owner is God? But it's worse than mere rudeness. Human rulers could have come up with all kinds of penalties for cursing or insulting them, and God made it plain that in His special domain, His name is sacred. A pagan can be forgiven for not knowing about the Covenant God, but not a pagan living among the Covenant People.

This would be a ritual execution. He was removed outside the camp. Everyone who witnessed the blasphemy would put their hands on his head. This is a condemnation of the man's sin by those who had first hand knowledge. Then he was stoned – placed in a low spot where those condemning him would be first to drop large stones on top of him, a place he could not easily escape. It continued with everyone in their extended families getting involved, along with the

appropriate elders, until the man was buried under the stones. Everyone has the duty to protect the Covenant. It was basically crushing the man to death.

Then the Lord takes a moment to put everything in context. He reiterates that humans are not treated as animals. Crimes against animals are actually crimes against the owners. And crimes that fall below execution will mean the perpetrator must bear the same loss as the victim. Jehovah is no mere man. Simply insulting His position as Sovereign of the Covenant is a pretty serious crime. You can insult men and injure them, and not be executed, but insulting God is a high injury because the *shalom* of the nation rests on God's glory. Diminishing His glory is a threat to everything the Covenant stands for.

Uncovering Nakedness

In the Old Testament, the phrase "uncovering someone's nakedness" was invariably a reference to sexual intercourse. Even if it was a private thing, as sex should be, it could be tantamount to a public humiliation. It was something degrading and abusive. It exposed someone's nakedness to demonic infestation. From that time forward, their private parts were a domain of demonic presence. The "covering" of God's blessing was torn away. Publicity wasn't really the issue, but the exposure to demons; however, it might as well be public humiliation.

This was typically associated with idolatrous practices, but it didn't have to be. People had little or no reason to publicly humiliate someone sexually except as a matter of degrading pagan ritual, but it was still an open invitation to demons. It was making a sacrifice of someone else's innocence to a pagan deity, and in Scripture, all pagan deities are demons. There is only worship of the true Creator; all others are demons who capture the worship that should go to God.

If you worship your own self, in the sense of self-glorification, or simply can't restrain your lustful impulses, it's still service to a demon. Thus, any public act of sexual humiliation is inherently an act of demonic worship. But secret sexual encounters are no different. Notice that Leviticus 20 is all about stoning to death, and sometimes burning the corpse. The same actions without a specific idolatrous intent would not necessarily bring the same penalty, but sexual sins do.

We've already covered how private marital sex occurring during a wife's menstrual period is treated as a mere ritual defilement in other passages, not a capital sin as mentioned in Leviticus 20. Hebrew men didn't loathe menstruation, but feared the intimation of idolatrous practices associated with seeking a woman's menstrual blood for demonic ritual magic. But according to Biblical Law, every sex act outside the bonds of a marriage covenant was *de jure* demonic.

Thus, proper marital sex was never "uncovering someone's nakedness." Pay attention to the context when reading the Law of Moses. Then again, in Old Testament History, nearly every instance of homosexuality was tied to vile pagan religious rituals. There were very few men and women sexually attracted to their own gender without a pagan influence; it was nearly always a matter of service to some pagan deity. And those who were homosexual or bisexual were suspected of being idolatrous, because demonic influence is considered the source of it. That's what made Sodom and Gomorrah so disturbing. It wasn't a pair of cities filled with queers, but degrading ritual sex practices in service to demons.

And publicizing any kind of sexual desire in that context was inherently an act of devotion to demons. It's a paradox that the Old Testament Hebrew culture was so matter-of-fact about

human sexuality, but then held it as something that must be kept private. It wasn't embarrassing, just none of your business. That's quite different from our Anglo-American cultural silliness of being so prissy about human sexuality, so that the only way to be "honest" about it is to engage in vulgarity.

Leviticus 25:1-22

The laws of land rest are not limited to the Covenant, but are universal in nature. They are offered as something inherent in the natural world itself. The land itself shall keep a sabbath. Every seventh year, you shall not plant or harvest anything. However, the voluntary crops can be eaten as you pass through, grazing as it were. To be more precise, you can take enough at one time to make one meal for your household, but so can anyone else who would normally be in your village. Even the livestock were to be allowed access to the fallow croplands.

As we might expect, this placed a greater emphasis on summer fruits and wild produce in those rest years. Wild food was always available for harvest, but there would naturally be a preference of effort for domesticated crops. The Sabbatical Year was a time of going back to the roots of faith and trusting the Lord to provide, as if one were a mere nomad in the land. This is the quintessential image of the Covenant Nation.

The law of Jubilee has been debated for centuries, and is in dispute to this day among rabbis. Was it the 7th of Sabbatical Years (49th), or was it the 50th, another year after the seventh Sabbatical? For us, it doesn't matter that much. The whole point is that we know how every national economy needs a reset just about every generation or so. Otherwise, tyranny results and revolutions are inevitable. So God commanded Israel to do this on a schedule. The text says the fiftieth year was sacred.

In that year, all productive farmland was returned to its original clan ownership. That way no part of Israel could ever be completely alienated from their original grant from God. Property mismanagement must be forgiven at the end of the guilty generation, so that their descendants can try to learn from the mistakes of their elders. In like manner, bond-slaves must be released from their bonds. All debts must be forgiven. This formalized a schedule of redemption that, by Ancient Near Eastern custom and tradition, occurred when any new Gentile king took his throne. Instead of relying on the vagaries of how long a king might reign, for Israel it was scheduled by a set number of years.

Notice that, in effect, Israeli land cannot actually be sold, only the produce of the land for a set number of years can be leased. The price was to be adjusted, prorated on the basis of how many years were left before the next Jubilee. The same with any Hebrew bond-slave; you could only lease the labor, not keep the person as a permanent possession (barring the special ceremony previously mentioned in our study).

As for Gentiles living in the land: They were not protected by the Covenant. They could be permanently bought and sold, but they could not do the same to the hosting Hebrew people. Furthermore, nobody could abuse a Hebrew bond-servant. This was a matter of respect for the God who owned all things, land and people in particular. Also, the Levites and their land grants were given a different treatment as God's unique personal property tribe.

Urban property was not affected by Jubilee, particularly houses (again, except for Levitical cities). The point here was productivity. The people were God's treasure, and arable land was one's heritage granted from God. So what would God's people eat during the Sabbatical years?

God promised to ensure that the sixth year would see the people harvest enough to last three years. That's enough to eat that year, all year during the Sabbatical, and to eat and provide seed for that next year. That implies they were likely to grow enough to export some in any given working year, but not for those three years.

This is part of the definition of *shalom*: God promised reasonable prosperity for those who obeyed His revelation of how to live – “and you will dwell there in safety.”

Leviticus 26

The balance of chapter 25 gave us the exceptions to Jubilee and basic right of redemption. God is the one who divided up the Promised Land, and it was He who decided what could be redeemed, so as to keep things balanced among the tribes the way He wanted. But that chapter reflects the underlying nature of how we must live on this earth to make the most of what God has granted.

In this chapter, the Lord offers a very strong warning. Notice how He promises that the land, the earth and nature itself, has a will to enforce the Covenant. This is not the same as the pagan outlook, fearing the forces of the natural world; that's not what the Bible teaches. Scripture teaches that Creation is responsive and obedient to the Creator. In this we should be eager to join.

There is no substitute for reading this chapter yourself. The lessons are both gentle and stern. The power to live with confidence and joy is hidden between the lines of God's Word of revelation. Keep in mind that the specifics of the Covenant of Moses are more precise and detailed, but generally the same covenant as that of Noah. The Covenants work completely regardless of human consciousness. But He has not been silent or coy; everything we need has been clearly revealed for all to see and understand.

If your heart is committed to Jehovah as Lord and Master, you will surely find a way to please Him. Creation itself will witness to your heart the truth of what God requires of you. If you embrace Him as your true Father, it's not that hard to touch His heart with your passion.

Thus, the chapter ends with the promise to Israel that this covenant will never end. And it didn't; it was transformed when Christ arose. It became the covenant God had always planned to reveal to all of humanity. But to understand how the Covenant of Christ works, you must absorb the powerful sense of communion with God and His Creation, and commit yourself to avoiding things that irritate Him. This is a fresh revelation of what *shalom* means.

Read it for yourself.

Numbers 25

In Numbers 22-24 we have the dramatic tale of Balaam, a gifted prophet and scholar of the ancient religions of nomadic Semite tribes. He was familiar with the religious lore and practices of people like the Midianites. It was Jethro, a Midianite priest who taught Moses the ways of God under the name El, so that in the end, it was this God who revealed Himself to Moses by the name Jehovah. Balaam didn't know that much about the Covenant, but he knew plenty about the God who established that covenant.

When it became obvious that there was no way Balaam could use sorcery to find a way to persuade El to curse His own nation, he went to the fallback plan: defiling the people. Working

with Balak and the Midianites still residing east of the Jordan Rift Valley, Balaam concocted a way to get the people to curse themselves before God, using a common pagan religious practice. Women living there could raise money for their patron goddesses' temples by selling themselves as ritual prostitutes.

Thus, chapter 25 opens with this practice in full swing, sending their women on a sacred mission to seduce the men of Israel. The patron goddess in this case was the Asherah consort to Baal of Peor, for whom Mount Peor was named. Historical records indicate this was a particularly degrading sexual cult.

God told Moses the only way to mitigate this vile self-curse on the people was to execute the Israeli men who had indulged in this cult worship, by impaling them with poles and standing those poles out in the heat of sun. Moses thus ordered his Sanhedrin to take responsibility each for the guilty men in their own feudal domains within the tribe and begin the grisly executions.

Now this consultation between Moses and the Sanhedrin took place during a gathering at the Tabernacle, where elders of the tribes had come to meet with Moses about this hideous moral plague in their camp. No sooner had Moses given this grim command, but one of the battle chiefs came into the camp escorting a Midianite prostitute, and in full view of this distraught conference, presented her to his brethren as their new hired play-toy. He then took her to his own tent first, before passing her off to others.

Among those standing near the Tabernacle to watch this flagrant evil was Phinehas, a grandson of Moses' brother Aaron. He grabbed a spear, ran to the tent and nailed them both to the ground with one stroke. The narrative uses the term "plague" to describe the moral weakness that had compromised so very many men. When people saw what the Sanhedrin were going to do when they caught someone involved in the cultic ritual sex, they were turned away from the temptation to join in. Thus, the plague was stopped.

This dramatic act also spurred the rest of the leadership to get to work. Most translations tell us that some 24,000 died in this tragedy. For his zeal, Phinehas was rewarded with a personal covenant promise from God to keep his household in the priesthood. Granted, as one of the Sons of Aaron, this was already something God had commanded, but the implication here is God's special favor. This wouldn't excuse the sins of his descendants, but it promises they would prosper as leaders among the priests. Phinehas clearly understood the gravity of this situation.

The two executed in the tent are named, and then the Lord says that from here on out, there could be no peaceful alliance between Israel and Midian. While massive slaughter wasn't in order here, there could be no trust in these former allies. They were too willing to sell themselves into moral corruption.

It's no surprise that the New Testament warns us how sexual impropriety is such a grave sin against oneself. Worse, it cannot be removed from its idolatrous associations. When sexual morals are loose, demonic presence is inevitable. The hard choice of Phinehas took away the demons' power to corrupt Israel.

Numbers 30

The Talmud made a hash of things with vows and promises, creating a whole category of vows that had no effect, and allowed the smart-aleck rabbis to get away with lying. The New Testament makes a point that you shouldn't need a vow in the first place, that people should be

able to trust your word on matters great and small.

In this case, it has to do with making a vow of obligation to the Lord. In most cases that refers to including God as witness of some promise you make to anyone else. In Matthew 5:33-37, Jesus specifically refers to this chapter in Numbers. He said vows and oaths should be unnecessary, that people should stop cheapening the whole process of communication under the Covenant.

Still, in Ancient Near Eastern culture, people would typically bind themselves under oaths for any number of reasons, but mostly because ANE folk were skeptical and cynical in the first place. At any rate, God tolerated a certain amount of this, but the basic requirement is that people of the Covenant follow through unless released from the promise by the beneficiary, or by some higher authority.

This is the nature of small “c” covenants between people in that culture. If you were wise enough to operate from the heart, you would not likely bind yourself in folly. However, this was a feudal society and higher authority would have to be made aware for most covenants to stand. This chapter assumes things that don’t interfere with a higher feudal authority. Thus, a man should bear the price of keeping his promises.

However, a woman was protected from her folly. The reason was stated clearly in the matter of the Fall: women can be morally deceived more easily than men. Thus, this passage warns that any vow a woman makes under patriarchal authority requires her covering’s acquiescence. Not his permission, you notice, but simply that he is aware and had nothing to say about it.

This holds for a woman whose covering is either her father or her husband. A widow or divorcee without patriarchal covering is stuck. Of course, in modern Western societies, the state stands in for her covering, but God doesn’t buy that. His law stands on Creation itself. While the consequences may not come right away, Creation itself marks the defilement of manipulation and deception.

Deuteronomy 6

How would you maintain a feudal commitment to a Lord you never saw?

In the previous chapter, Moses reminded the people that it was their own decision to avoid getting too close to God. They begged Moses to go and face Jehovah on their behalf, and they would surely obey whatever it was Moses relayed to them. The Lord agreed to that, but even with the column of fire and smoke hovering over the Tabernacle, the people still quickly went astray.

The power of leadership cannot rest on a shock to the human senses. That might do well enough to establish authority, but it cannot maintain the sense of awe. The sense of awe must come from within; the newness of external shock wears off in the fleshly mind. So Jehovah lays before the people a very strong command to make a commitment from the heart.

So after a few introductory matters, He states flatly that He is their sovereign Lord, and they are His vassals. He is the one and only Master they have to deal with. It was utterly necessary that they fully commit their whole beings to Him. Nothing could be kept back.

Then in a symbolism that they should have understood, the Lord warned them to provoke themselves from within, to find any and all means necessary to keep this fresh in their minds. It was literally their law to talk about this often, to teach and to make it a habit to think about it often. But everyone knows that, if it rests on a human discipline, it simply will not stand very

long.

So the Lord goes on to remind them how much it will hurt if they forget.

He's going to let them conquer the people and drive them out, and let His nation just walk right in and take over where the previous occupants left off. He was giving them the whole land and all its infrastructure as an inheritance. They didn't have to work too hard for it. Would they be able to make it a habit of mind and mouth to give Him credit for it?

Maybe if they sort of regimented the business of teaching their kids about how Jehovah saved them from Egyptian slavery. Maybe if they reminded themselves how all of this was promised and prophesied, and then brought to reality before their eyes.

It is just possible for humans to engage in a heart-led conscious awareness. In that culture, the heart-led way was a basic assumption, but we can see that far too many people slipped below that standard too often. Yet, those who understood all that made a portion of this chapter a sort of daily ritual chant, in a desperate bid to keep that heart-led commitment alive:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

Deuteronomy 7

We are no longer a political nation on this earth, but a spiritual kingdom infiltrating and overlaying the whole world on a higher level. So the lesson here is symbolic of something spiritual and moral in nature. Here we find moral truth in parables.

First, the Lord establishes the meaning of being His Chosen People. We are going to invade a land promised generations ago as the inheritance of His Covenant. That promised land is the symbol of your own life, your earthly existence. It is infested with all sorts of evil inhabitants, and the Lord has called on you to enter that land, to explore it and to conquer it, and more importantly to occupy it. You are to repurpose the land to be a showcase of God's *shalom*. You are taking back from evil a life He delivers into your hands; turn it around and make it serve Him.

You cannot make peace with the demons who live in your life. You cannot make agreements to let them stay, regardless of whatever benefits they claim to give you. Anything they offer is poisonous; it will be your demise. More importantly, it will mean that the lands of your life are not delivered at all, but remain captive to the whims of their master, the Devil.

You aren't stronger than the demons there, and they surely outnumber you. Indeed, you aren't worth much in human terms, and you wonder what the demons want with you. But the Father has promised to His Son an inheritance of many lives, and yours is one of them. So the Lord will not renege on His promise, but will deliver your life. Still, you must show no mercy to the demons currently occupying your life. You have been delivered from slavery, and it's now time for you to stop living like a slave and start living like a conqueror. The demons cannot resist your valid claim to the land unless you start fudging and compromising. Be faithful and courageous.

If you remain committed, then all the promises He has made since He first spoke to humanity in Garden will be yours to claim as your birthright. Everything you touch will be blessed; everything you do for His glory will succeed and bear fruit. The blessings of Joseph are still

around. Every life you touch will be changed by His glory, and His Kingdom will grow.

Sure, the demons are more powerful than any human, but they are under divine authority. If you walk in that divine authority, they are bound by your obedience. It won't matter who they are or what powers they possess; your obedience is an eviction notice. You are now the inheritance of Christ, for His use only.

Granted, He won't drive out those demons all at once. You have to convert the various parts of your life to a divine purpose. That's a whole lot of work, and it can't be done quickly. It takes time for you to recognize what He gave you, and then to make it serve His purpose, before you have sufficient resources to take on the next challenge. But fear not; when the time comes, no demon can hold out against your commitment to His Word.

Don't compromise and don't hesitate to make drastic changes. Tear down the old idols and don't even be tempted by the alleged precious materials in them. Those things were built by demons. There is nothing of value to you there. And while you are at it, keep a watch on all the entrances to your soul, so that the demons don't sneak new idolatries in the back door.

Keep your eyes on the divine calling of God, the single purpose for which you were adopted as His child.

Deuteronomy 8

We continue with the passionate warning Moses gave to Israel about keeping the mighty works of Jehovah in their minds. They couldn't see Him, but they had seen all the ways His sovereign mercy brought them out of slavery and made them a great conquering nation.

If nothing else, Moses reminds them that to this very day, roughly forty years after the departure from Egypt, they had been living off manna. This remains one of the oddest, most inexplicable miracles in the Old Testament. It provided sufficient nutrition to replace everything they could have eaten back in Egypt. It was their only food, and fed them alone in a place where food was scarce for individuals, let alone a whole nation. Nothing we have seen since that time comes even close.

Moses reminds them that it was meant to put them in the proper frame of mind to serve their God. He was testing whether He could get them to trust and obey Him as they would be expected to serve any human ruler, even though His demands were often far less stringent than was typical of kings. There were really very few things here completely new to them.

Some desert sheikhs used the language of adoption of a people by covenant, but no one had ever heard of a deity doing such a thing. So they were His family, and the only way to make sense of this chapter is to play along with the image of a sheikh adopting adult children as heirs. There would be playful declarations of talking to them like children.

Thus, He sent them to bed without supper once in a while so they would recognize who was in charge. What mattered is they imprinted on obeying Him like children would a natural father. Food going in their mouths was never the issue, but what came *out* of His mouth. We note that in the Hebrew text, there is no "word" here, but a much broader insistence that everything that comes out of His mouth should be of interest to them. There would have been dozens of wordless expressions and mouth noises that had meaning, and it was important that they learn to take subtle cues, instead of legalistically demanding clear statements at every turn. This higher demand prevents them from falling back on juvenile semantic games of "gotcha."

He saw to their every need, so that during the 40 years of the slave generation dying off in the wilderness, nobody had any real problems. They didn't even get blisters and their clothing never wore thin. Just as a father disciplines his children, so the Lord tested His nation. They should act like loving children of their Father. We forget how close and reverent children were to fathers in that time and place, wholly unlike the smart-mouthed brats of our day.

So when He brings them into a plentiful land, they should naturally be quick to remark what a wonderful God they served. What a joy it is to be the Chosen of Jehovah! Don't let obedience slip away, like something you dropped somewhere in your life and quit thinking about where it was. Don't stand up proud like kids pretending to be something really special, the ruler of all they survey and a terror to the rest of humanity. Know when to stop pretending and bow before the God who gave you all of this.

It is God who grants *shalom*, who puts it in reach so that genuine effort actually yields something of value. He is the God who makes sure everything turns out right, even when you muck it all up. God keeps His promises under the Covenant; don't you forget your end of it. If He can crush the nations who opposed His will for you to conquer them, He can just as easily disperse you across the whole world.

Deuteronomy 20

True to its name, Deuteronomy (*deutero* = secondary and *nomos* = law) is a second recitation of the Covenant. Thus, we skip over some chapters reiterating things specific to the context of that people, that place and that time.

However, the law of warfare in this chapter speaks to something utterly foreign to our current understanding of such things. What we have here is very brief and sketchy. Tactics and battle training are one thing; the fundamental nature of how God works in human conflict is another thing altogether.

Israel is His adopted family, a people destined to conquer and occupy a land promised to the Patriarchs. It was not merely a gift of inheritance, but it was His command that they commit genocide. Jehovah had a beef with the residents of the land; He had made that clear. He even warned Israel in previous chapters that it was not because the nation were such fine people that He was giving them the land. Rather, He denounced them as very stiff-necked people. But the reason He was sending them into the land to kill and destroy was because the current residents were morally evil beyond any tolerance.

This was a grisly mission, and God needed an army of men who were utterly convinced of the moral necessity of cleansing the land. So first would come the priests to remind the troops that this was not just something God was permitting, but it was His marching orders to go and face whatever it was the filthy scum could raise against them. Never mind them being bigger people, with armed chariots and walled cities. God said those people were already dead, so Israel needed only go bravely to face them and the enemies would collapse in battle.

This was standard in that day and time. Troops were to become utterly convinced that their ranks were filled with the spirits of their deities, and that the opposing deities had abandoned their people. Whoever turned tail and ran had lost their spirit, quite literally. In this case, it was the one and only Creator God who marched with Israel, and their opposition worshiped demons subservient to the Creator. The land itself cried out for relief from this filth, so go wipe it out.

Before they go, the officers (their own clan warlords) would come and thin the herd down. Men who had unfinished business would not go to war. That is, if they were betrothed and still in that year between the betrothal and the actual wedding, then they would need to go home and get married, make babies. If they had built a new house for their family, and had not yet formally dedicated it, they should go home and take care of that first. Move in and get it all set up and the household running. If they had planted a new vineyard, something that took years to begin bearing fruit, they should go home and harvest that first crop.

These men would be distracted from the battle, thinking and longing too much to go home with all that unfinished business. Men who had established families and households, or who had invested a few years into their vineyards – these men would have something to defend, something a man would fight for. He needed to feel vested in his own future and the future of the covenant community. Yes, some of them would die in battle, but that's better than the whole nation turning tail and someone conquering them all.

Naturally, if there was anyone lacking the conviction to want the enemies dead, they would hinder the essential business of warfare. We aren't going out there to reason with the occupants; a battle comes after the negotiations have failed. Get it firmly in your mind that they have signed their own death warrant by rejecting the Creator and His terms of peace.

Granted, there were cities out there on the fringes or outside the Promised Land who would cause you trouble. Israel didn't inherit their land, so if they surrendered, then take some tribute and a few slaves and leave them alone. But if there was no way to live peacefully with them, then take 'em out. Kill all the males; their future generations are forfeit. Save the females and plunder for yourselves, Israel.

But as for the people within the borders of the Promised Land, save nothing alive. Kill all the people of both sexes, all ages, and all the animals. Take only the food and the stuff, and empty the buildings not dedicated to demonic deities. Shrines and temples and idols must be destroyed. Don't destroy the crops, and don't use fruit trees in your siege works. You'll be glad you saved them later when you live there.

The first issue of note here is recognizing who was an enemy. Idolaters are a threat by their very existence. Second, it is critical to understand that they cannot be rendered harmless. As long as they breathe, they will do all they can to subvert your trust in Jehovah. This is a reminder in symbolism that we dare not get too close to people who won't serve our God. They aren't a part of the covenant family, so you must maintain a solid boundary with how much you let them into your life. If they don't die to self, they'll kill your faith.

Deuteronomy 29

Many religions refer to the goal of reaching an enlightened state. This was a common element in the various religions of the Ancient Near East (ANE), as well. The broad culture of the ANE presumed that the ultimate good for human existence is to see things from a higher perspective, to gain a sense of moral clarity that made one a source of moral truth. As always, the terms of such a discussion were symbolic, because it was commonly understood that intellect alone was insufficient. They believed that the intellect could not follow the heart into enlightenment, but would have to learn to obey the heart. How a man might gain such enlightenment varied among the different religions of the ANE, but there was a common element of seeking it from one or more deities.

So a basic assumption of Old Testament religion was that Jehovah alone could grant a transcendent moral clarity. And it would require a persistent effort to act on the more obvious demands of the Covenant, but to also contemplate on what those commands meant more broadly. It was expected that one seeking enlightenment from God would begin by trying to personalize the Law, to see through the commandments to the divine moral character of God as a Person. It's not as if no one young ever received such a wondrous gift, but it was considered typical that it might take most of a person's life to push aside the self enough to catch a glimpse of the divine. But it was always within reach to anyone who really wanted it.

The Hebrew traditions understood the heart as the seat of commitment and moral identity. You could have a heart committed to the wrong things, for sure, so the language of the Covenant documents are filled with admonitions to commit oneself to Jehovah as Lord and head of the household, and to learn to love Him as adoring children.

This chapter opens with Moses reminding the people, while they yet camped east of the Jordan River, that their whole existence as a nation rested on the Covenant. Look at all the wonders Jehovah performed on your behalf, Israel! This is a part of the Covenant, part of His promises to us. You've seen things with your own eyes that other nations only imagine.

And why has God not yet given them that divine enlightenment (v.4)? The implication is that they haven't persisted in trying to understand what the Covenant really means. Forty years they've been led faithfully by God's servant. Their clothes and sandals didn't wear out; they've lived a very pure nomadic existence without conventional bread or wine. Of course, there is grand symbolism in the reference to bread and wine, so don't miss that. He also defeated King Og of Bashan and added his kingdom of vast grassy ranges to the Promised Land, much to the delight of two-and-a-half cowboy tribes. The point is that His hand has been gentle, but they have been disciplined. Did it do any good? Have they gotten the message?

Not if Moses has to remind them to devote themselves to the Covenant. So let's review: Every member of the nation was standing before Moses to hear the reminder of the Covenant requirements, as well as every ally hanging out with the nation, because they are under that Covenant even if they don't embrace a full covenant identity. There is no excuse; nothing has been kept secret from anyone. The whole point is that not a single person under covenant obligations can complain that they didn't get the word.

Turn your heart to the Lord!

Now, surely there will be some smarty pants in the assembly who thinks he can hide in the crowd. Somebody out there is bitter and bears a poisonous attitude, thinking to himself that he won't stand out. He pretends that a drunk man can walk along with sober men and nobody will notice he's tipsy. The Lord is watching every heart. Don't be a fool; God will distinguish between those who intend to obey Him and those who are just playing along for the sake of convenience. Jehovah will pile on this man all the curses individually that are indicated as penalties in the Law for the whole nation.

Can you recall seeing the land of Sodom and Gomorrah near the Dead Sea? Do people not still marvel over the ruins of it today? Elder generations tell the younger folks how the evil of the residents there brought down such destruction upon themselves. Other nations near the ruins tell strangers the same story of how God simply could not tolerate them, even in a fallen world, any longer. And would not the same thing happen to Israel if they forsake the Covenant? Well, it can happen to individuals, too.

God does keep some secrets, but He has been quite generous with revealing the Covenant requirements. We have them in writing; God Himself wrote them down for us. No other deity has granted this much insight to any other nation.

Deuteronomy 30:11-20

The basic concept is not so hard to grasp. God made us for better things, but we are fallen. The human race, consistent with its nature, chose to follow human reason instead of revelation. The only recovery from that fall is to restore the primacy of revelation. Revelation lays out a path of return to Eden; the path ends when the fleshly body is finally dead. So that path requires from the first step embracing self-death as the final destination.

The first generation outside the Garden of Eden knew how to get back inside. They understood the necessity of self-death. As generations passed and human numbers proliferated, the distance back to Eden increased. There were more and more variations on how to take other paths that led nowhere. At some point, precious few humans could find the way, so God came up with a plan to make it more obvious once again. He extended a call to Abraham and made some promises about restoring that clear path. Those promises led to this moment when Israel camped on the east bank of the Jordan River, about to cross over and conquer the Promised Land.

All the way through the Exodus, as noted in previous chapters here, the people kept acting like the revelation was too demanding. It required changes from a people notorious for fighting all change, a people who frequently drifted back from any progress they had made. Yet nothing God commanded was so radically different from what any human ruler would have demanded, and a whole lot more generous than a human ruler could have offered.

Moses proposes a very reasonable question: Just how hard is it to give your loyalty to someone who brought you out of slavery? How hard is it to serve someone who wants to make you the greatest nation on the earth?

So the focal passage begins with Moses noting that the covenant provisions are in writing, plain as day for anyone to read. It had been quoted to them enough times that they should have memorized it by now. No other deity had ever done this for any nation in human history, though a good many human rulers had done something like this. This divine revelation wasn't murky and difficult to understand. It didn't require entering some trance state where the spirit left the body and risked dying to glimpse it. The nation wasn't required to travel across the sea in some brave quest (the Hebrews had not a single sailor at this point, so sea travel was by the far the most feared and poorly understood). Those kinds of action were common in the Ancient Near Eastern mythology as the ways people might gain access to divine revelation.

No, this covenant was in writing right here in their own language, in terms they already understood. They could speak it out loud and they could discern what it required of them. It wasn't as challenging as they made it out to be. It's really simple: Do you want to live on the earth long enough to find your way back to Eden? You most certainly do have the capacity to commit to Jehovah as your feudal master, and to treat Him as your new adoptive Father. All you have to do is act like you belong to His family. That was by no means a foreign concept to them.

The rewards were more than words could tell. But if you couldn't bring yourself to be loyal to Him, then you should expect Him to act like any earthly ruler would and remove all those

covenant protections and abandon you to your fate outside His covering. Think about how quickly and easily the Israelis provoked hostility from others.

Moses called as witness every spirit being in the heavens, and every sentient soul on earth, and all Creation itself: Here it is folks, right in front of you. Cling to Jehovah as your Lord and Father, and everything you could possibly use will be yours.

The Joshua 5

The passage is short, but it requires a lot of context.

Keep in mind that the Conquest of Canaan Land was not a standard military invasion. It was purely a religious war aimed at destroying the major pagan temples in the Promised Land, those that were known to influence the broad religious habits of the people. The intent was to reduce resistance to the observance of the Covenant once Israel occupied the land. Every time this occupation went well or went bad, the underlying issue was whether Israel had destroyed a major pagan influence. While there were a few nations condemned to extermination, a significant population was allowed to stay under the terms they would accept feudal domination by Israel and would keep their idolatrous practices out of sight.

The Land of Canaan had a very wild mixture of tribes and nations, and the majority were known for ritual practices that were downright disturbing. Even the Greek and Roman empires of later times regarded them as debased and repugnant – including brutal child sacrifice and sexual rituals hard to imagine. The call to Israel was to “cleanse the land” of the worst of these demonic influences.

While the text of Joshua could be interpreted to put a lot of weight on ritual purity, anyone with a passing knowledge of the Ancient Near East would know that this was mere symbolism for something much deeper. It was commonly understood that the people of Israel were held to a high moral standard, and accountable for a very personal loyalty to Jehovah.

In the first few chapters, we have Joshua succeeding Moses as ritual head of the nation. Up to this point, leadership was simply chosen by God. Moses had been a Levite prior to Aaron’s anointing as the first High Priest (there were no priests before that time). However, Moses had been trained as a son of Pharaoh, which included military expertise, among other things. In theory, Jehovah was Israel’s King, but His proxy was more like a simple warlord in effect. Joshua was from the Tribe of Ephraim, which was already a major source of military might in the nation.

But the point of this conquest was religious. This was to be the conquest by Mosaic Law, but the foundation of that Covenant was the much older Covenant of Abraham, a covenant of personal loyalty between two people. This is why we keep seeing references to the “land promised to Abraham.” Also, keep in mind that this was hardly the only military activity in this region. Pharaoh had only just recently marched through to crush a rebellion of sorts, and had taken a multitude of troops as captives back to Egypt, mostly to slave away at the same work Israel used to do some forty years previously. This weakened the military readiness of the land just as Israel was about to move.

A primary miracle here was timing. Israel crossed the Jordan River during the barley harvest. That meant food for plunder was widely available, lots of unleavened grain. It also meant that the Jordan was at flood stage, which offered the perfect opportunity to hold a demonstration of divine power. There were plenty of observers already on hand in the highlands above the

Jordan River to watch this ritual stuff. They had been tracking Israel for quite some time. The priests carrying their nation's divine throne (Ark of the Covenant) touched the water and all the flow from above stopped, while the water in front of them drained away downstream. This was shocking to the spies watching. None of their myths and legends even came close to this.

As the chapter begins, we are told that everyone on Israel's hit-list was shaken by this miracle. Their one natural defense during barley harvest meant nothing to these nomad invaders of Jehovah. Quite literally, the demon spirits that provoked them to fight had deserted them. God made the initial investment; it was time for Israel to ante up and make their own sacrifices to remain pure enough for God to keep fighting on their behalf.

This was the Middle Bronze Age in that part of the world, but God demanded Israel use more ancient flint knives for the ritual of circumcision. It was actually the better tool; flint was mined in this area for small blades well into the Iron Age. More importantly, it was to show Israel that this was from the Covenant of Abraham, who himself would have used a flint knife for this ritual. And since no one had the nerve to attack them, they could afford the time to rest up and heal.

The nation had not been permitted to perform this ritual after their failure to obey forty years prior. So the reference to "a second time" was likely recalling something that took place at the foot of Mount Sinai back when it became mandatory instead of merely typical. So this was the second catch-up to ritual purity that God demanded during the Exodus.

Now they were fit to observe Passover, the celebration of their identity. The reference to the "reproach of Egypt" symbolized several things. It was not about the Egyptians, as they practiced circumcision, too. It referred to Israel still having their hearts trapped in Goshen. As long as Israel was wandering in the wilderness, they were still nothing more than escaped slaves. They weren't allowed to celebrate any of the important rituals that gave them a covenant identity during that whole forty years. Now they were about to inherit their Promised Land, and the privileges of the Covenant were restored. Crossing the Jordan was an echo of the Reed Sea Crossing. Camping in Gilgal (Heb. "wheel" or "circle") was an echo of Mount Sinai. They were coming full circle and under a great burden to keep their end of the deal. They were certainly able to obey, and God expected it.

The text notes that directly following Passover, they were able to observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread by virtue of plundering grain from the undefended land outside cities that had begun to close up for siege.

To verify that God considered them provisionally pure enough to represent Him, Joshua met with his counterpart from God's personal bodyguard, the angels. The symbolism of taking off sandals in this context is rather like someone entering the carpeted tent of the ruling sheikh. It betokens voluntary exposure of oneself to the will of the ruler. One of the first things a captive surrenders is his footwear so he can't run away; he can only wander as far as the carpets of his master. Further, the very ground is His personal domain, so you are not permitted to soil it with your dirty shoes. Today's Arabs still recognize this symbolism where intentionally touching or slapping something/someone with the sole of the shoe is the ultimate insult. It's connected with ritual welcome by washing feet, shaking dust off the sandals, etc.

Joshua 7

Once again we are dealing with Amorites, who are not famous for building much of anything.

The east ridge of the Jordan Valley was filled with sites of ancient pagan shrines, mostly in ruins at this time. The Amorite way is to pitch tents among the ruins. If there was enough usable building materials still at hand, they might try to reconstruct the shrines. However, they seldom bothered with building much else if it required significant effort.

The best we can tell, the site identified as Ai was just ruins at this time, which is just perfect for the Amorite ways. Most likely they partially rebuilt the shrine and began turning it into another tourist trap, claiming that they had restored the ancient worship of some forgotten deity. A primary element in their shrine services was various types of “sacred prostitution.” Like Jericho, the site was on a major through-route.

Indeed, Israel’s conquest would require using the route that runs past Ai, so they didn’t need a filthy idolatrous shrine overlooking their march. Again, this is a religious war. So Joshua sent out his combat surveyors. It was a short journey upland via a wadi that ran west of the Jordan. The hilltop ruins weren’t very well protected, and it was a nice flat top, probably not fully occupied, since the ruins didn’t spread over the whole thing. Attacking troops would be able to take up a good formation before that assault.

So the report came back that this was an easy job, and again, no need for conscripts. Just a relative handful of professional warriors should be able to take care of it. But they were unable to handle the few Amorite defenders from the ruins. The attacking force was driven down the slope and some three dozen were killed in the pursuit. The location of Shebarim has not yet been identified, but it probably refers to a quarry on the route back to the camp at Gilgal. The Lord was not with them in battle.

Joshua was extravagant in his approach to the Lord, and his words include typical Hebrew hyperbole. He laid there until evening, technically the next day. God’s answer was curt in Hebrew terms: Go find the sin in the camp. The Hebrew term behind the English words “cursed thing” is more ambiguous than that. If it’s something that was dedicated to God as a burnt offering, you can’t touch it. If it’s something God says He wants to use, you can’t touch that either. Doing so creates a barrier to *shalom*, AKA a curse. It removes the covering of God.

Since no one fessed up the assembly the next morning, Joshua and the High Priest went through the ritual of selection using the Urim and Thummim. It got whittled down to the household of Achan. Finally this man confessed and described what he took from the destruction of Jericho: a fancy robe from Shinar (before it was called Babylon), a gold bar and silver in coin form. The robe was supposed to be burned, and the precious metals were supposed to be in the Tabernacle treasury. That gold bar was about as big as a large modern clay brick. The reason he hid the silver on the bottom of his stash is because in those days, silver was cash, but gold was mostly for decoration. We have reason to believe that a lot of folks in those days valued silver more highly than gold.

So Joshua had his attendants go check and they found all of it where Achan said it would be. We have no idea where the Valley of Achor is, but it wasn’t far from Gilgal. However, it was far enough that Achan’s goods and herds were fully separated from the camp. This is in keeping with bringing dangerous people and scapegoats outside the camp for some ritual purpose. Keep in mind that if the camp at Gilgal was even as much as 250,000 with tents, wagons and herds, that was quite a large spot on the earth all spread out.

This man was guilty of causing the death of 36 warriors (nobles) and his family was complicit. So all the family was stoned – crushed under big rocks in a hollow spot. They added a

significant mound of stones on top of that, symbolizing to everyone that this was the grave of a criminal, and folks would have regarded it as cursed. All of his property was burned on the spot as an offering to the Lord. This turned the wrath of God away from the nation.

Judges 2

The balance of the Book of Joshua relates the destruction of the most significant temple cities. Then, when God told Joshua to pass the torch, for the duration of that generation of people, Israel continued subduing the people of the Promised Land. Things went well until that generation aged and died off. Then the tribes began to weaken in their warfare, and a great many pagan nations were left in the land.

Our focal passage explains why that happened. First, we need to understand that the Hebrew term translated as “Angel of the Lord” is a title, but it refers to several different angelic characters in the Old Testament, so it’s not a permanent assignment. Without a specific name, it signals more the nature of the assigned mission: This angel was sent with a message directly from God’s throne. It will be the words of God in the mouth of another, speaking on His behalf.

In typical Hebrew fashion, we are given an image of this angel marching up the long wadi from Gilgal, where at least the leadership of Israel still camped. The Hebrew scribes were notorious for drifting back and forth in chronology, so this event with the angel was sometime before Joshua’s final retirement ceremony, to set the stage for the rest of this book.

God rescued them from slavery in Egypt and, keeping His promise to the Patriarchs, brought the nation to the inheritance land. He empowered them to defeat all enemies, but they were obliged to cleanse the land and ensure Jehovah alone was worshiped there. They didn’t do that. As Joshua and his retainers aged, the newer generations became less zealous, and began to compromise. They allowed too many nations to remain as feudal vassals.

So God decided to let them have their way. He would not drive them out, either. Rather, He would let them stay and serve Satan as minions of temptation. They would be a perpetual test, drawing Israel off into idolatry if they could. The image was thorny bushes pulling at you as you passed, and snares that kept catching your feet. The implication dawned on the people and they wept in sorrow. The Hebrew name for the place was *Bochim* (“weeping”). We can’t be sure where this is, but it would almost have to be a place where an open assembly could be held. And it seems to be in the vicinity of ancient Bethel, probably at the highest end of the wadi everyone used to travel upland from Gilgal.

The passage goes on to explain that once Joshua retired and eventually passed away, and all the leaders who served under him, a new generation arose that had no memory of the mighty miracles God had done. For some reason, we get the feeling their parents failed to teach them in any organized fashion. So the people had lost their sense of identity; the Exodus and all the trials where God showed His sovereignty were forgotten. Since the rituals of the pagans worshiping Baal and Astarte in the land looked about the same as those they grew up with in Tabernacle worship, the Israeli people started drifting off into idolatry.

Things went from bad to worse. Having been handed a situation where their nation was the ruling class over everyone else in the land, they started losing their edge and the tables turned on them. As they mourned their situation to Jehovah, albeit doing so only as their national deity, He sent a half-measure of relief: judges. There is no Western equivalent for what these leaders did, so the word “judges” is probably a bad translation: someone who pronounced

sentence, to either vindicate or punish. They exercised authority in terms of Covenant holiness. They understood the demands of the Covenant and vindicated God's demand for obedience. These people would demonstrate that obedience in sufficient measure to gain attention and start performing the miracles promised under the Covenant. Far from perfect, these people were simply a whole lot closer to strict obedience than anyone else around.

So these "judges" were appointed to serve for life, and were granted Covenant authority to execute God's wrath on the idolaters who weren't under the Covenant. We know that there were national judges and tribal judges, and some whose range of moral dominion isn't obvious. So long as they lived, they executed God's wrath on the folks Israel should have driven out long ago.

So the deliverance was always partial and conditional. Over the long haul, some of those infesting tribes and nations were killed off or driven out, but it was a very slow process during the time of the Judges. The text tells us that God saw this coming, which is why He didn't allow Joshua to conquer every last vestige of the Canaanites.

Judges 3:12-30

The basic cyclical pattern of Judges goes like this: Israel would engage in idolatry. God would remove their covering and deliver them into an oppressor's hands. They would pay a hefty tribute to someone who was not a covenant ruler. Their economy would suffer from the drain. After doing this for a while, they would remember to call on Jehovah. It wasn't necessarily full repentance, but they would call on Him as their national deity. He would send someone to execute covenant justice and deliver them from oppression. Things would be fine until that deliverer died and then Israel would slip back into idolatry again.

During this period they could really drift very far into pagan ways. We get little bits here and there indicating just how normalized it became from time to time. Consider that the very name of *Samson* celebrated a pagan deity, and some of his exploits were related to pagan practices for marriage and romance.

The story of Ehud rests on a wealth of historical detail that is not included in our Scripture text. The author presumed the reader already knew the story, but if everything we find pertinent was included, the Bible would be a massive tome. While we cannot trust the Talmudic legends, and better sources are few, we can get a clearer picture than what one might guess from the text itself. Keep in mind that the Book of Judges is not in chronological order as we would view it, so the dates of the various narratives can only be guessed.

We know that Moab had several tribes jockeying for primacy, just like a lot of other tribal nations in the Ancient Near East (ANE). Eglon's pedigree is uncertain, but we know that he would have struggled with keeping the whole nation behind him. Most likely he rose to prominence through bribery after some windfall. This is most likely how he managed to gain an alliance with the Ammonites and Amalekites. These he then relied on to keep him in power over his own Moabites. In the narrative here, Eglon's behavior betrays a man who faced intrigue against his life every day.

Using his freshly assembled army, he raided the area of Jericho ("City of Palm Trees"). Once they held it, the area became a source of revenue to help him stay in power. Besides, Jericho had been rebuilt by now and he had himself a nice palace there. It was out of easy reach from his competitors among the Moabites, and it was a really nice place to live. It was warm in the

winter, wet in the dry seasons, and provided crops year round. Whatever size he was when this all started, living in Jericho kept him fat – massively obese, even.

So this situation lasted 18 years before Israel started paying more attention to their own God. The Lord raised up Ehud. A significant number of Benjamites were left-handed. That was a very rare trait in the ANE. Given the length of his rule, Eglon's bodyguard probably became a little complacent about some things. Ehud, as a noble warrior, put himself at the head of the tribute delivery entourage. He had strapped to his right inner thigh a bronze dagger the length of his forearm, and it would have been handle down. Eglon's bodyguards were unlikely to search there because it would be inconvenient to a right-handed fighter, if you understand the protocols of how this stuff works.

Eglon had a promenade leading to his palace, and the entrance was near Gilgal, the old circle of stones just across the spring creek from Jericho. He would have received this tribute outdoors in some nice shady spot. After having presented several wagon loads of seasonal produce, the group was heading back to the wadi they used as a highway into the Hills of Ephraim. Ehud stopped at the gateway of this promenade where Eglon's stone pagan images stood, carved at a nearby quarry. Ehud turned back and returned to the outdoor meeting place near the palace. He told Eglon that he had a secret message.

Eglon was hardly suspicious of this. After nearly two decades of faithful service from Israel, and constant unrest from his own nation and neighbors east of the Jordan Valley, it didn't surprise him that a faithful Hebrew would have a warning about some new intrigue among Eglon's allies. So the king told Ehud not to speak. He hastily arranged for a private interview in his upper floor breeze room.

This would have been a nice room atop the palace, probably with a secure but open lattice to allow the breezes to help keep him cool. The man didn't get around very fast, and we should expect he was quite often in that breeze room. So he went up there and sent out all his servants, since he could probably never guess who was spying for an enemy and plotting against him.

Ehud would have walked in and dropped to one knee near the man's throne, and bowed over with his face down to the floor. Announcing that he had a message from Jehovah, Eglon respectfully stood at the invocation of a deity. With his right knee bent in front of him, Ehud could reach for the long dagger strapped to the inside of his right thigh unnoticed, whip it out and stab Eglon low in the belly before the fat man even realized he was hurt. The large gut was splashed back by the thrust, then fell back over the handle of the weapon. Ehud needed to move fast and didn't bother trying to fish it out for a second strike. Besides, it cut through his entrails and some of the contents oozed out. So he stepped out quickly and locked the door behind himself.

Eglon would have used a chamber pot in a breeze room like that, and it no doubt smelled like it at this point with his lower guts cut open. So the various servants held back until they felt embarrassed enough to try sneaking into the breeze room for a peek. They found a very messy corpse of Eglon. By this time Ehud was already hustling up the wadi to give the prearranged signal that he had been successful at killing the tyrant. Nothing in the Law inhibits this kind of assassination of a ruler who wasn't under the Covenant. Never forget: the Covenant is the sole moral covering. Meanwhile, Eglon's court was thrown into chaos, since any number of parties would have been happy to sponsor Ehud if they had known of his plans.

So, the Israeli troops were already primed for action and assembled quickly, while Eglon's

forces were probably thinly scattered and of questionable loyalty in the first place. Ehud's attack quickly overwhelmed the troops stationed around Jericho. The whole thing was a really big surprise to Eglon's army. With Moab's internal disunity, and the lack of vested interest for the Amalakites and Ammonites to defend Moab, it meant a fairly quick defeat.

The tactic described in the narrative was a quick force seizing the fords which were upriver from Jericho, the only reasonable path between there and Moab. So the guard force in Jericho was isolated, outnumbered and slaughtered. Also, no messenger could have gotten through and raised the alarm back home. As even more Israeli troops assembled in the Jordan Valley, they could march against Moab itself in a surprise invasion. The situation was reversed as Moab now gave tribute to Israel for the next 80 years.

Ruth 3

The story of Ruth falls near the end of the Period of Judges. Despite the hideous idolatry and debauchery of the times, some people still did the right thing.

During a famine in Israel, a man from the Tribe of Judah named Elimelech traveled to Moab, most likely because he got word the drought wasn't so bad there. Chances are he leased his own land out for the duration until the next Jubilee. He moved to Moab with his wife and two young sons. During their stay there, the man died rather young. His two sons tried to keep things going and married local women. Eventually the two sons also died rather young. There was now no one to take care of Naomi as a widow, so she returned to her ancestral home back in the Bethlehem area.

Because her two daughters-in-law were young and free to remarry, she released them back to their fathers' homes. One of them refused, and was determined to support her mother-in-law. We know her as Ruth, and the two went back to Naomi's home. They were welcomed back, but things were still tough, so support was thin at best. Still, word got around quickly what the situation was with Naomi and Ruth. Taking advantage of what few opportunities there were, Ruth went out into the fields during the barley harvest and gleaned, permitted according to the Covenant. At some point she ended up in the field belonging to Boaz, someone related to Naomi.

Boaz was impressed with Ruth's devotion and convinced her to stay with his reapers. He instructed the workers to treat her as a VIP and to make sure she had plenty to keep her busy, dropping enough for her to pick up. They also protected her from any young fellows who might try to take advantage of her vulnerability. Out in the fields, she would be an easy target for harassment as a foreigner, and even rape. Boaz protected her as best he could without embarrassing anyone. She worked the fields of Boaz during the entire Feast of Weeks, nearly two months in the spring, bringing home enough grain to keep her and Naomi alive. This was pretty good, considering that Naomi had no way to reclaim anything Elimelech had owned, since it was under a long term lease.

Our focal passage starts with Naomi realizing that Ruth was still a desirable young lady. But it was complicated. The Covenant emphasized keeping land ownership with the clan. If Naomi did nothing, eventually Elimelech's land would pass to some relative anyway. The only way to help Ruth was to find a kinsman redeemer who was willing to marry her and raise up grandchildren in Elimelech's name to inherit that property. That meant convincing some kinsman to carry out that duty at some expense to himself – buying back the leased land,

paying for a wedding, and raising a family separate from his original household. With everyone struggling to survive this ongoing drought (due to Israel's idolatry), spending money on an additional wife and children with no payback at all was a tough sell. About the only fellows who would be willing were young men with no wife and children's livelihood to risk, or someone pretty wealthy.

Boaz was apparently a rich and older bachelor. Having seen how he was kindly disposed to Ruth, Naomi instructed her daughter-in-law to claim him as her kinsman redeemer. This would leverage the land as the issue, but it was quite a bonus to Boaz to have a young wife after all these years. It was a sacrifice on her part, knowing she was quite likely to be widowed again in too short a time. On the other hand, it would make life for Naomi in her declining years comfortable again if Ruth had a son to inherit Boaz's property. Readers unfamiliar with all of this background would not realize just what kind of dedication and sacrifice Ruth demonstrated here.

The Lord was taking care of Boaz; his crop was decent. It was common during a good grain harvest for the owner to host a big party, particularly at the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It was customary for him to sleep next to his big pile of threshed grain, a ritual symbolizing a man protecting his harvest. For Ruth to show up and hang out on the fringes of those invited would not surprise anyone at this point, given how he had treated her. As the festivities wound down, she hid in the shadows until Boaz bedded down next to the grain.

She slipped down onto the threshing floor and laid next to him, pulling his cloak over onto herself, and uncovering his feet in the process. As the temperature of the night dropped, his feet got cold and he shivered (English translations usually miss the point here). As he rolled over seeking to pull his cloak over his feet, it wasn't off due to a breeze or flopping, but because of a woman there. He asked who she was, and instantly recognized the symbolic gesture she had made, and the import of her words. He was quite flattered that she would choose him over more conventional options she might have had.

He was the right man. He warned her that one other kinsman would have to surrender the right of redemption first. He told her to keep things quiet, then loaded her up with as much grain as she could possibly carry and sent her home.

In the next chapter, we learn that this other fellow was not willing to take up the expense of redeeming Elimelech's land if he had to raise up grandsons to inherit the land, none of which would go to his own family. But Boaz had nothing to lose. From this marriage was born King David a few generations later.

1 Samuel 7:3-17

Samuel was from the Tribe of Ephraim, and was a major prophet, *de facto* High Priest (because he grew up in the Tabernacle), and the last of the Judges. Israel was under oppression from a new threat. The Philistines had colonized the southwestern coast of Israel just a couple of generations before. They represented a civilization that was spread across the Aegean and as far east as Cyprus. They had one primary advantage over Israel in having learned to make and use iron weapons, while Israel was still in the Bronze Age. They were also some of the hardest boozing people in that part of the world.

Israel had paid them tribute for quite some time. There had been one incident in battle where Israel's army foolishly brought out the Ark of God from the Tabernacle at Shiloh. After losing it

in the battle, the Philistines were sorely afflicted until they returned it. The Ark rested for two more decades in Kiriath-jearim, which we believe is a town some 7 miles west of Jerusalem. The text tells us that Israel began longing for Jehovah again.

So our narrative begins with Samuel issuing a call to Israel to restore the Covenant and put away their idols. This they did, and Samuel called them to worship at *Mizpah* (Heb. “tower”). While there are five different places with that name in Palestine, we believe it was the one rather close to and just south of Bethel. They had a time of fasting and offerings there. Naturally, everyone showed up with their weapons, since they were under threat.

The Five Lords of the Philistines noticed this armed gathering and assumed the worst. They mobilized for a quick strike, because it appeared their vassals were worshiping to curry the favor of their God before going to battle. So as this force began approaching Mizpah across the plains, lookouts could see the movements and quickly reported via runners to the leadership gathered in the hills. The elders called on Samuel to redouble his efforts to gain Jehovah’s favor on their behalf.

As the Philistine army got close enough to form up for battle, the Lord struck them with some awful noise that shattered their confidence. It served as a signal for Israel to attack in force. The Philistines fled and many were cut down on the slopes before they even got to the plains. Samuel then erected a stone memorial marker and named it *Ebenezer* (Heb. “stone of help”).

The Philistines removed their troops from the captive cities held hostage in the borderlands with Israel. They never came back to trouble Israel during Samuel’s lifetime. The chapter ends with an overview of how Samuel worked hard to keep Israel faithful.

1 Samuel 8

There is something subtle that most Western readers miss in this chapter. It’s not a question of having a single leader; Samuel was already that. In the past they had Moses, Joshua and a few judges who played that role. There’s no sin in asking for another judge. There’s no sin in asking for a senior national elder. But a king is a different matter.

Had the people asked for restoration of the Tabernacle and a High Priest, it would have helped a great deal. They didn’t seem to care much about that. They wanted to be like the nations around them, which is precisely the wrong thing to request. It was a slap in the face of God, who was their true King. If God is King, then the resource burden is confined to His tithe, His devoted tribe of servants, etc. With a human king, it adds an additional tithe on all produce and people and labor, and more.

The first three verses of this chapter show us there is a valid complaint. This is the weakness of inherited leadership over divinely appointed leadership. Samuel should have had the sense to seek the Lord for a better successor long ago. Who can say how things broke down with his sons, but it was a bad situation and they were not judging righteously.

So the tribal elders gathered to Samuel at his old home, Ramah (*Ramathaim-zophim* AKA *Rathamin*). Instead of asking his guidance, they presented a demand they had agreed upon before they came. When Samuel approached the Lord, he got a sympathetic ear. But the Lord took it as a personal insult Himself. In essence, the response was to give them what they wanted, but to also warn them what it would cost.

Thus, Samuel counts out for them the kinds of things a human king must have to reign. It’s an

impressive list, and just scratches the surface. Then Samuel added a warning: You can choose your own king, and when things go bad, God will not deliver you from what may come to seem like your worst enemy ever.

They didn't care at all about that. They insisted on being like every other nation in that region. This was the voice of fear, wanting a cheap answer to a complex problem they had made for themselves. So Samuel returned to the Lord to hear from Him; was Jehovah sure He wanted to do this? Yep. Give them what they want. Samuel dismissed the assembled elders because it wasn't going to happen that day.

From this narrative, we learn just how truculent Israel was. They refused to see what a grand and special nation they could be, not requiring the follies of fleshly accommodation typical of the rest of the world. Yet it also shows just how weak the Covenant could be against the sins of laziness (refusing to occupy all the land and driving out the Canaanites) and fear (wanting a fearsome human ruler instead of an even more fearsome God). This is part of how the Law teaches us not to expect much, even when men have a direct revelation from God, unless they are individually redeemed and walking in faith.

1 Samuel 12:6-25

The people got their king. The Lord chose Saul, a handsome Benjamite man who stood head and shoulders above the average Israeli man. His reign was more like a warlord than a proper king. He called the people to battle against the Ammonites and they won. Samuel was about to retire from his formal leadership duties, and called the nation to hear his last word of prophecy as Judge.

He started by recounting how the Lord had led them through judges, starting with the Exodus. Then he listed a few of the major wars they had with neighboring kingdoms, pointing out how Jehovah had no trouble defeating their enemies through the leadership of judges. Yet here comes one of the lesser threats, and they come insisting that God give them a king to lead them into battle.

So here you go, Israel. Behold your king! And if you obey the Lord, things will likely go well enough. But if you disobey Him, it won't matter who wears the title, because you'll be under some other nation's yoke again.

Then as a reminder of just Whom they were dealing with, Samuel put on a demonstration. Here it was the wheat harvest, long after the early and latter rainy seasons. Samuel said he would call on the Lord to send a highly unseasonable thunderstorm and rain that would threaten their wheat harvest. Before the day was over, it came.

So the leadership confessed that they had sinned, and begged Samuel to intercede for them so that harvest would not be destroyed, nor would they be struck by lightning out in the open hills where they were gathered. Samuel told them they really had nothing to fear unless they forgot this lesson and chased after empty idolatry again. They must follow the Lord with all their hearts.

Of course, Samuel affirmed that he was not retiring from praying for them, only retiring from judging. But if they slipped back into idolatry, they and their king would suffer.

1 Samuel 15

We remember that the Amalekites harassed Israel during the Exodus, attacking the rear of the column where the infants, elderly and sick were riding in wagons. It was universally regarded as a cowardly act, the kind of thing for which the Amalekites were well known. It's hard to pin down just who these people were, and the name cannot be restricted clearly to descendants of a man by that name. Rather, it appears he gave his name to some people his descendants joined. Balaam refers to them as a very ancient nation that may have been around before Abraham (Numbers 24:20), but that they would be wiped from history.

By the time of Saul's reign, the Amalekite range was centered on the Wilderness of Zin, an area west of Edom, and starting just south of the usable land held by Judah. As near as we can estimate, Telaim is the name for an area near Ziph, down in the Negev, not far from the western border of Edom. At that time the border of Edom would be some poorly defined area they guarded in or near the southern rift valley rising out of the Dead Sea. Saul was marshaling his troops on the eastern end of the Amalekites' range.

Their "city" was probably little more than a dense collection of tents with some stacked stone and piled sand fortifications. They were distinctly nomadic. The attack would hardly wipe out their whole nation, since they ranged all over the Sinai Peninsula. However, it would reduce their numbers significantly, since this was likely the single biggest concentration of them.

The Kenites that Saul advised to leave the area were a tribe noted for their metallurgical skills. The most memorable member of that tribe was Jethro, Moses' father-in-law. They had done Israel no harm, so Saul was being fair with them.

The attack ranged on the eastern end from some place called "Havilah." It turns out this may have been a generic descriptive name instead of any actual place, because the label shows up in the Bible all over the Ancient Near East (ANE), starting with a reference point for the river flowing through Eden. It appears to mean any really sandy area, which could be anywhere in the eastern Negev. The slaughter continued westward to the ancient highway known as the Way of Shur that ran from Egypt, through the central highlands in Palestine, and all the way to Assyria.

Saul's carnal nature showed through in the victory march home. He saved their King Agag and all the better livestock found in Amalekite possession. The purpose in holding the king would be to keep him as a living trophy in Saul's court, a common practice among ANE warlords. The troops took the livestock as plunder, though a lion's share would have belonged to Saul. Notice that everything followed rather uncivilized tribal customs common to nomadic tribes in that part of the world.

The Lord warned Samuel that Saul could not be trusted to obey Him. For this, Samuel wept all night, because he was very fond of Saul. In the morning, Samuel learned that Saul had returned to a town named Carmel (not the mountain up north on the coast) near where he had marshaled his army and set up a monument to himself. From there, he came around the western edge of the highlands to Bethel, and then down to Gilgal in the Jordan Valley. This remained somewhat a national headquarters still.

The exchange when they met later that day showed Saul was unrepentant. He talked as if he had no real control over his army, and that they seized the livestock as plunder. Then Saul tried to make it sound like they were planning on using the livestock as offerings. Here we have the

famous verse saying that God puts a very high value on obedience over ritual observance. God cannot be bribed, but He can be won by a faithful heart. This is the soul of the Covenant itself, to live as faithful and loving children adopted by the Father.

Saul's confession of his failure rings hollow. He was more worried about his reputation, having Samuel's presence with him in front of the troops, than he was about God's will. He begged Saul to stay for the ritual victory celebration, essentially a thanksgiving service of worship. There was a dramatic moment when Saul grabbed the edge of Samuel's cloak and tore it by accident, and Samuel remarking how it symbolized God tearing the reign from Saul. Again, Saul very painfully cared only for his reputation. So Samuel relented, but it was a bitter celebration for him.

By this time Agag is pretty sure he's safe, so when Samuel demands to see him, the Amalekite comes out rather cheerfully to meet the nation's chief shaman. Samuel was completely unsparing, pronouncing sentence and executing him on the spot by his own aging hands. It was a ritual slaughter symbolizing God's wrath on the nation of Amalek.

Samuel returned to his home in Ramah, and Saul headed back to Gibeah. The two never met formally again. The Lord is characterized as regretting making Saul king.

1 Samuel 16:13-23

This is not as spooky and inexplicable as it appears on the surface. The Lord had commanded Samuel to go and anoint a new king for Israel. He was directed to David, the youngest son of Jesse.

Upon being anointed King of Israel, the covering angel of the Lord left Saul and stayed with David. This left Saul open to the demons that were waiting for their chance. Demons respect divine covenants. As long as Saul was the anointed, he had some protection. But his intensely shallow spirit was a beacon to demonic forces. With the covering angel reassigned, Saul was wide open to torment.

We learn later that the torment included violent urges arising from paranoia. This was quite unpleasant to Saul. His advisers knew the answer: It needed someone with a gift for worship in music. The shofar was not appropriate; this called for an instrument that would allow singing. About the only thing they had at that time was something like a lyre called the *kinnor* in Hebrew. So far as we know, this was a ten-stringed instrument played on the pentatonic scale (5 notes, missing the 2nd and 7th from our octave).

The task required someone who bore sufficient charisma to seem noble, and with strong faith in Jehovah. It so happened that the same David who had been secretly anointed the next king was also well known for his strong musical talent in worship. So he was called into service in Saul's rather primitive court. As we would expect, his talent and devotion were sufficient to restrict the demons.

David was promoted to the position of Saul's armor bearer. It made David the equivalent to a captain in our terms, but with a special assignment as the King's personal assistant. He was sensitive enough to recognize when Saul was tormented and could sing the torment away.

Any other explanation misses the point. A pure heart-led worship of the Lord tends to clear away demonic presence anywhere, but is particularly potent under a covenant. Still, as Saul was increasingly alienated from God, the torment escalated in intensity and frequency. He was

holding the throne unjustly by the provisions of the Covenant, and should have abdicated.

The obvious lesson is that singing worship songs, even without any actual talent, can still reduce moral and spiritual tension. More to the point, it reduces demonic power and presence when you are doing something for the Kingdom.

1 Samuel 22:6-23

It's very easy to get lost in the fascinating details of the conflict between Saul in his deepening madness, and David in his growing faith. It was the King's paranoia that drove David out of his position in Saul's court. We notice how David struggled to remain faithful to the Covenant without exposing himself to the King's insanity. It only complicated matters that David and the King's son, Jonathan, had sworn a covenant of friendship.

What matters for us here is how David weathered this fallacious persecution by remaining loyal to Jehovah. Nothing in Moses promised all things would always be smooth sailing; rather, God had warned that there would be times of testing. David was being forged as an instrument of divine justice.

In the previous chapter we learn that the priests had managed to reconstruct some portion of their divine service in a hilltop community called Nob. The Tabernacle was gone, as were the furnishings, but they continued with however much of the rituals they could as required in the Covenant. In his flight from Saul, David stopped by their worship tent. He sought to spare the current acting High Priest the liability from having to choose whether to cooperate with him, and so deceived him about the nature of his visit. The future king obtained discarded Bread of Presence and Goliath's sword, since the technology of forging iron weapons was still a closely guarded secret of the Philistines.

We learn that Saul had accepted the feudal service of Doeg, who was from Edom. Such service required Doeg fully convert to the Covenant of Moses, and the rituals may have been a part of why he was there the day David and his bodyguards came. Of course, David knew who Doeg was, having served in the same royal court. He also knew Doeg would report it to Saul, but harming Doeg was simply not allowed under the Covenant.

David passed through a series of hideouts, even pretending to madness himself while staying in Gath of the Philistines. For a time he gathered an army of malcontents who had suffered under Saul's reign, along with his extended family household in the cave of Adullam. Seeking to protect his aging parents, he committed them to the care of the King of Moab, relying on his kinship through his great-grandmother, Ruth.

Then, the prophet Gad warned David not to stay in the Cave of Adullam, which was on the border with Philistia, but to find some place in Judah proper. David and his army camped in the forest near Hareth. Our focal passage begins with Saul having received an incomplete report about David's whereabouts. About the only reason Saul would be hanging out under a tamarisk tree would be the dense shade during the hotter months in Israel. He pulled out a characteristic rant about how he had been so good to his chief officers (fellow Benjamites), and here they showed their loyalty by keeping secrets about Jonathan and David working together against him.

Doeg had everything to gain at this point, because he was the only outsider. He related David's visit to Nob and how the High Priest had given him Goliath's sword and some leftover

showbread. So the priest was ordered to appear before Saul. He did so with alacrity.

When presented with charges of conspiring with David, the elder priest answered correctly and honestly. He had no reason to imagine David was a traitor, and this was hardly the first time he would have provided any services David might have requested. It would have been treasonous to have refused David anything he asked.

In his paranoia, Saul refused to hear anything the priest answered, but ordered his servants to strike down the man, and then to go and destroy the village whence he came. But Saul's fellow Israelis refused, because they knew it was a deep crime before the Lord. So he ordered Doeg to lead the reprisal. The Edomite didn't hesitate, proving that his conversion was a mere formality of convenience. His depravity was characteristic of his home nation. Once again, the priestly service of worship in Israel was destroyed.

Indeed, the whole town was slaughtered as if they were Amalekites worthy of total annihilation. A single surviving priest managed to escape and went to find David. The young leader took full blame for the destruction. There was no just way to prevent that outcome. He knew Doeg would do anything to consolidate his position in Saul's court, but had to trust the Lord. Yet he knew beyond all doubt that God would not abandon him to Saul's madness.

1 Samuel 24

In the previous chapter of our text, David and his men had narrowly escaped Saul's pursuit simply by being on the other side of the same mountain, somewhere near Maon, in the southeastern Judean wilderness. As Saul's troops began circling around both sides of the mountain at once, David and his men took off down a wadi. At this point, a messenger warned Saul that a Philistine raider force had invaded again, so he rallied his troops to meet this new threat.

After chasing off the Philistines, Saul received a report that David and his men had gone downslope toward the Dead Sea, to En Gedi. This area on the western shore of the Dead Sea is riven with steep canyons, and caves all over the place. Saul reduced his attacking force to a select group that could travel faster. Keep in mind that they were moving on foot, as Israel still observed the Lord's command not to collect horses yet. With a smaller group, they would not need wagons, but could reduce their baggage to what draft animals could carry directly and take rougher routes that ran straight to the target.

At some point, Saul needed a potty break – to “cover one's feet” was a Hebrew figure of speech for relieving the bowels. For privacy, Saul happened to choose the one cave in which David and few of his men were hiding. Saul would have laid aside his outer garment and armor for this task. While the men with David tried to persuade him to take advantage of this moment, David simply slipped up close and sliced off a section of Saul's royal outer garment. It would have been distinct from the rest of what his troops wore.

As it was, David really didn't feel right doing that much, and backed off with his prize, despite the urging of his bodyguard. Besides, they never would have escaped the troops outside the cave. So David waited, and Saul never noticed his robe was shortened.

Once Saul was down a ways from the entrance to the cave, David popped out and announced himself. He reasoned with Saul about what had just happened. Clearly David was no threat to Saul, nor desired his death. For David, Saul was still God's anointed King of Israel until he died or chose to abdicate. David refused to raise his hand against the Lord's anointed. To emphasize

his point, David held aloft the tail of the robe, obviously the same cloth as what Saul was wearing.

Saul was in one of his better moments, weeping with the full weight of recognizing what a fool he was. He confessed his folly and admitted it was clear who was acting royal here. There was no doubt David would be King soon enough, and he asked that his family be spared any vengeance once David took the throne. David swore a valid oath before the Lord, and the two men parted with their troops.

1 Samuel 28:7-19

The Philistines were on the warpath again, ready to humble Israel and make them pay tribute. The invaders camped in the upper Jezreel Valley. Saul led his army out to meet them, camping on the opposite side of the valley, on the slopes of Mount Gilboa late in the day before battle. Saul was nervous and inquired of the Lord. But of course, that was a waste of time, because the Lord refused to support Saul any more.

Despite having driven all the necromancers underground (sometimes translated “witch”), Saul asked his close advisers to find one. They accompanied him to Endor, a hike that took them out on the other side of the Philistine army camp. The text says that this practice was fake, referring to it as “having a familiar spirit.” It was someone who had cultivated a relationship with a demon who would come when invoked and pretend to be whomever someone sought to speak with from the dead. The demon would offer whatever lies would serve the purpose of deceiving the seeker. This was widely understood among those who were educated in the Law of Moses.

The passage also refers to a similar practice, translated often as “wizard” – someone who would use various kinds of deception, mostly a form of ventriloquism. It was a scam, plain and simple. The “wizard” would make it sound like a traditional concept of what a ghost might sound like, a soft whispering squeak, as far as we can tell. The necromancer actually used dark powers to get a demon to speak.

The necromancer would invoke the demon and could tell by the feel of things that this was the same dark presence they had felt at other times. But when Saul in disguise asked for Samuel, the woman had no chance to invoke her familiar demon. Instead, she saw rising from the grave someone quite real and not at all familiar, and not at all what she was used to. She described the spirit she saw rising, and Saul knew it was Samuel.

So the spirit of Samuel appeared and remonstrated with Saul about troubling his rest. Saul explained why he dared something forbidden by the Covenant: he was up against a massive enemy force and had no sense of assurance he could do any good. There was no sense of faith at all; Jehovah had abandoned him. Samuel reminded Saul he already knew the answer. Saul had made himself the enemy of God, and there would be help from above.

On the morrow, Saul would join Samuel in the grave, and the army of Israel would be defeated.

2 Samuel 5

We skip over a lot of twists and turns in the saga of David succeeding Saul as King of Israel. During the transition, David was at pains several times to prove he would not hesitate to execute those whose sins threatened the nation’s *shalom*, but was careful not to harm anyone who was peaceful with him. So while David did go to war against Saul’s surviving heirs, he

treated the deaths of Ishbaal and Abner as murders. He even cursed his own cousin and commander of troops, Joab, for taking senseless revenge on Abner.

There are a few background items we need to understand. The nation had already been long divided between Israel in the north and Judah in the south. The division is not easily explained, and some of the critical events that contributed to it are not very well covered in Scripture. But very early in the Book of Judges it was readily apparent that the north clung to the leadership of the Tribe of Ephraim, despite Judah being clearly pegged as the royal tribe by Israel himself. Saul's Tribe of Benjamin had a tendency to ride the fence, which helps to explain how Saul was chosen as the first king.

Eventually Benjamin is associated with the south. Still, David had to wait for the final capitulation of Saul's heirs, and the northern tribes, before he could move on Jerusalem, because that city was actually in Benjamin's tribal allotment. The right of conquest makes it the royal city.

During Joshua's Conquest, the City of Jebus (AKA Jerusalem) was taken and occupied, but the old Jebusite fortress on the lower ridge below Mount Moriah's peak remained independent. The city itself was spread out on the western hill beyond what is now called the Tyropoeon Valley. North of the fort was an open space which had been sacred for centuries – Mount Moriah (where Abraham prepared to offer Isaac). We have no solid identification for who lived there. Our best guess is some Amorite types who were either Hurrian, or highly influenced by them. The few surviving names from the Jebusites seem to celebrate Hurrian deities. The folks inside were likely a single extended noble family household.

When David came to lay siege to the fort, the defenders made the boast that even the lame and blind of their inhabitants could fend off the attack, since the place was so very well protected naturally. The southern end and both sides were steep bluffs, and the northern end was a very thick fortress wall. That thick stone barrier eventually became a terrace wall to expand the Temple site.

One of the reasons the fortress could withstand a long siege was that they had dug a slender conduit down to the pooled water of the Gihon Spring. It was a natural spring with a low flow rate, and it had long ago been dug out and exposed a substantial underground pool at the source. Anyone outside the wall could access the pool by the very ancient opening, and it wasn't very far. But off the other side of that underground pool was another, newer conduit that was much longer and climbed up a shaft into the courtyard of the fort. So several of David's men managed to strip down to the essentials and shimmy through it. These would have been his ultimate warrior champion types, able to climb up the well shaft into the fortress and fight off the defenders well enough to bring in a squad that could force the gates open.

Keep in mind that everyone was still using mostly bronze weapons, relatively small and brittle, and good leather armor was pretty effective. Athletic men with good hand-to-hand skills could survive quite a while in a small space like the fortress courtyard, and may not have been noticed for a while. There weren't likely more than a couple dozen Jebusite warriors in the entire fortress, with a few others playing soldier during the siege. It wasn't a slaughter; the Jebusites surrendered and became resident aliens with the low status of Gentile residents under the Covenant.

David makes a taunt of their boast, referring to the Jebusites as "lame and blind" altogether, since they couldn't defend their fortress from him. It became a nickname for Jebusites, whose

survivors were never allowed back into David's new capital, called Zion or the City of David. David expanded the old fortress to cover the entire ridge top, and it was treated as his palace. You should not read the text as David actually hating people who were blind and lame, since he eventually welcomed the last survivor of Saul's household, the lame Mephibaal, as family.

To help David celebrate his accession to the throne, the Philistines attacked twice more, seeking to maintain the feudal dominance they had just won a few years before. David defeated them both times, being careful to inquire of the Lord each time whether he should go, and how to do it. These were attacks directly on Jerusalem, because the Valley of Giants (Valley of Rephaim) winds around and right up close to the city. The first attack strikes them on the flank. In the second instance, the Lord advised David to come around below them in the valley, wait for a divine signal, and attack from the rear.

David quickly established himself as a worthy king. The people were moved to follow him without dissent.

Note: The names were Ishbaal and Mephibaal, but later copies were made by zealots who changed the "-baal" part to the Hebrew word for "shameful" – *bosheth*. We have solid evidence that manuscript copyists made those changes during a later time when a certain kind of political correctness had risen in the priestly ranks, and they were the primary librarians at the time. Anything that smacked of the ancient Canaanite pagan idolatries was treated with an almost comical spite, so that even Ashtarte became "Ashbosheth."

2 Samuel 6

Sometimes the specific rules do matter. The Ark of the Covenant was regarded as God's Throne, the Mercy Seat. It could not be treated as any mere talisman. The issue was not the Ark itself but that it represented the place where Jehovah rested invisibly. Of course, this had nothing to do with the *shekinah* glory that came and went with the moral fortunes of the nation, because it was typically invisible in daylight. In the dim shadows of the Tabernacle, and then the Temple later, it would have been visible above the Ark when God's glory was with the nation. The Ark was His Throne whenever He pleased to use it, and no mere man could touch it without a commission from God.

The Ark had been lost in battle to the Philistines, during which defeat the Tabernacle at Shiloh was apparently destroyed. The Ark was eventually returned and kept by a nobleman of Judah in *Baale-judah* (Hebrew: "Lords of Judah," a cluster of towns, including Gibeah, dominated by Kiriath-jearim). It had never been returned to the priests and Levites. Remember also that Saul commissioned Doeg the Edomite to destroy the whole city of Nob and the worship facilities there, and only one of those priests survived to join David's entourage. There were other priests not living in Nob at the time, but this would have ended their regular service. There was no proper place to keep the Ark, but David felt moved to do what he could to honor the God of Israel.

Our passage begins with David calling out the noblemen and elders of the nation to accompany him to escort the Ark of Covenant to the City of David where the king had set up a proper Tent of Meeting.

But it started off all wrong. It was put on a cart. Granted, it was a new one that hadn't been used for any common task, but that's not how God said the Ark should move; it was copying the Philistine behavior. Nor are we told what happened to Abinadab's son Eleazer, who had been

properly consecrated for keeping the Ark. He wasn't in the company that moved it. Only two of his brothers are mentioned. So when the Ark joggled a bit crossing the threshing floor of Nachon, one of those brothers – Uzza – put out his hand to steady it. He was not consecrated to touch the Ark, so it killed him.

It was not so much Uzza's sin, but the failure of David and his entourage for not paying strict attention to the requirements. Thus, they were responsible for Uzza's death, both because he wasn't consecrated, and because the Ark was supposed to be carried by Levites on the fitted poles. This whole scene really struck David hard. So he turned aside to the nearest Levite in the area, Obed-edom. He's called a "Gittite" which normally indicates the Philistine City of Gath, but he's originally from Gath-rimmon, one of the 48 Levitical cities.

During the three months the Ark rested there, the Levite's house was notably blessed. At least it was in the possession of the right man. So when David heard, he was reminded of his errors on the previous attempt and this time resolved to do it right. On this occasion we know it was properly born by Levites because the text talks about it being carried. After they took six steps and nothing went wrong, David celebrated by having some animals ritually sacrificed and burned on the spot. This would require having a significant number of priests and Levites, more than those needed to carry the Ark. Thus, the journey to his palace courtyard was completed.

But during this journey, David danced ecstatically the whole way. We are told he was wearing only an *ephod*. There is a lot of debate about what that Hebrew word covers. All we know for sure is that it was a ceremonial garment, commonly worn by priests on down to attendants in the Tabernacle/Temple service, sometimes over other garments. Whatever it was, David's dancing caused him to be a bit exposed in this garment. His first wife, Michal, was not too pleased with this.

David finished the rituals associated with a joyous celebration, with lots of offerings that would have been burned whole, some shared with the officiating priests and Levites, and plenty of thanksgiving offerings to share with everyone who showed up. As he went about the final step of pronouncing ritual blessings over his palace and family, Michal gave him a sarcastic remark about exposing himself to all the young servant girls in the royal household. Oh, how regal!

David responded that this was the God who made him king while her father still lived, and promoted him over Saul's entire clan. Furthermore, David was quite willing to abase himself even more before the God of Israel. And was it not odd that those servant girls would respect him far more than his own wife? We are told in typical roundabout Hebrew fashion that David never slept with her again, bringing her into grave dishonor in the whole nation for never bearing him children.

2 Samuel 7

For once the passage very nearly speaks for itself. Yet the lesson here is critical to understanding the Covenant of Moses.

The potential for what God promised here was very much in the Covenant, but the direction it took added substantially to that covenant, giving it a shape that no human could have foreseen. This is very much according to the ideals of a national adoption covenant, but given the history of Israel up to this point, with her stumbling, bumbling failure to fully obey the Covenant, who would have expected this one man to rise to such heights of God's favor?

So I ask you to notice the depth of personal loyalty between God and David. It's everything God

had always offered, but David is the first in a long time to seize the opportunity. This one man saw the offer as a bonanza, a rich treasure, an offer to which he could hardly say, "No." It was a privilege no man could merit.

Notice that David makes much of how great his domain is in terms of the people. Notice how great the people are for one reason: They were called by God to declare His glory. It was a nation God Himself redeemed and treasured.

Now consider that in Christ, the Son of David, you and I inherit all this. We can have the same depth of personal communion with God that David had. We can together hold the high privilege of being His glory on the earth.

Read the text for yourself.

2 Samuel 12:1-25

We skip over some of the highs and lows of David's regal manner so we can look at something that reveals a lot about how the Covenant worked.

David should have gone to the field with his army. If the battle didn't justify a full mobilization, it still needed his direct attention. It certainly would have kept him out of trouble. Instead, he stayed at home and fretted over things to the point that he couldn't sleep at night. So up in the cool night breeze of his palace rooftop, he spotted a woman enjoying the same setting for her bath.

Let's not get tripped up on whether she meant to tempt anyone. David was the one who made the move, when he should have stopped watching her. No, she put up no resistance. We aren't told about the possible intrigues, only that David is the one who sinned by his initiative, when he should have been somewhere else. He is the shepherd of his nation, and should have been, at most, amused if this was her attempt to get his attention when her husband was away. In ancient Hebrew culture, it was expected that women were the weak ones, which is why they were typically not allowed to socially mix with men outside the family. What woman didn't desire a romp with this charismatic King?

Good men of God don't succumb to groupies, even if they are the hottest babes ever seen. Good men are supposed to protect women from themselves.

So David took her to bed and made her pregnant. And this really complicated things, so David cooked up a scheme with his cousin Joab to get Uriah to come home and sleep with his own wife to cover it up. Uriah was too much a soldier to do that, so David conspired with Joab again to have Uriah killed in battle. Then he jumped at the chance to pull Bathsheba as the widow of a war hero into his harem. Now it was all legal. Except it wasn't. David knew it and God knew it.

Our focus text begins with Nathan the prophet using a parable to catch David off-guard. The parable was about David's abuse of his position and attempts to cover up his skirt-chasing. God was watching. The Lord would have been quite generous if David didn't have enough of all the good things in life, but David had to poach on what little God had granted some other man. This was one of the Ten Commandments: Do not covet your neighbor's wife.

A major source of sin is envy over what God grants to someone else, as if He slighted you. God isn't supposed to treat any two of us alike, because we *aren't* alike. His plans for us are sacred and often secret, if only to keep us from jumping the gun and spoiling things. We must learn to be patient in faith that He will get us where we need to be when the time comes for something

important to His glory. Let the Lord supply what He will, when He will, while you bless His name and give thanks.

So Nathan pronounced a curse from God: David would never cease to be a man of war. Indeed, his own household would fight internally. David would be publicly shamed, his harem publicly defiled, because of his secret sins compounded.

David was at least man enough to confess he had sinned and deserved the Lord's wrath. His choice of words signaled a readiness to die for it. However, Nathan assured him that was not in God's plans. Still, there was one critical failure that was not previously mentioned in Scripture: "by this deed you have given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme." In other words, this sin had diminished God's reputation, when David's sole reason for living was to bring Him glory. Jehovah's most famous servant betrayed Him to help the enemy. This vile tale would go viral among Israel's adversaries.

No, it was the child who would die for David's sin, because it was conceived in sin.

During the week or so after birth, the child was gravely ill and David fasted in sackcloth and ashes. When it died, his servants despaired of telling him, lest he do even worse. Still, David caught on, and asked them bluntly. Yes, the baby had died.

That was it, then. David went back to his regular royal duties and his servants were shocked that he stopped mourning. If David mourned so while the child lived, why did he not mourn the death? When they asked how this made any sense, he told them: As long as the infant was alive, there was some chance by faith that David could persuade God to relent. That's a fair representation of God's mercy. But once the child was dead, David's faith didn't extend to raising him back to life. He noted gravely that he would go to the boy someday, but that the boy could never come to him.

So David did what little he could to comfort his new wife, and made her pregnant again. This time the Lord showed His approval and sent the same prophet to announce His divine nickname for the boy was Jedidiah – Hebrew for "beloved by Jehovah." We know him by the name Solomon.

2 Samuel 21:1-14

The Books of Samuel appear to have been written by Samuel's School of the Prophets. It is not a dry chronology like the Chronicles, which was likely drawn from the royal archives. But typical of some Hebrew prophets, the writers assume their readers would have access to records, if not a direct memory, of pertinent historical events surrounding the prophetic message. Stuff gets left out of the narrative because the writers assume their readers already know all of the background.

First, a few reminders. The Gibeonites were the folks, living in several cities strung out along a wandering valley west of the Jerusalem area, who had deceived Joshua during the Conquest. They pretended to come from a distant land and wanted to make a submission treaty with Israel. Once made, the deception was found out. Too late; it was solemnly sworn before God without asking Him, and these Gibeonites were quite willing to pay whatever tribute was required by their new rulers. So they were placed under a rather substantial tribute of wood and water for use in Tabernacle worship. Don't read too much into comments about this being "slavery" in any Western sense of the word; it was tribute to which they agreed in the first

place.

That was roughly 400 years before David learns that a three-year drought and famine was because of violations of that treaty. So David asks them what he can do to set things right. Keep in mind that the Gibeonites did not convert; they were placed under the Covenant of Noah. If you review the terms noted in the narrative (Genesis 9:5-6), you'll see that it calls for murderers to lose their lives. More to the point, they are to be executed on behalf of the victims. Given the Ancient Near Eastern cultural viewpoint, we already know that refers to blood feuds, in which the closest kin of the victims accept the lives of the perpetrators (or their closest kin) as the peace offering that the victims make to the Lord to declare the matter settled.

Anyone approaching this from a late Western point of view cannot fathom how God would honor that kind of feudal approach to things. But they refuse to understand that this kind of feudalism was designed and demanded by God. It's written into the very fabric of Creation, which is why it comes wrapped in all this talk about blood speaking and Creation echoing. Blood for blood – and the community that stood to benefit from the crime is guilty as a whole. By rights, that community should be eager to clear their *shalom* from the blood guilt. See Numbers 35:33-34 about pollution of the land.

Saul had at some point in his reign killed some Gibeonites in violation of the treaty. Given what we know of Saul and his clan, with the notable exception of Jonathan, it was likely something to do with trying to seize Gibeonite land. That lovely valley was right on the edge of Benjamin's tribal holdings, and wasn't officially part of Judah's just yet, since it was still occupied by Canaanites. It's a good bet that Saul killed a substantial number of them.

The Gibeonites were not in a vengeful mood, to be honest. They were suffering from the famine, as well. They didn't want to take anything for themselves, and didn't wish suffering on anyone. Knowing the terms of Noahic Law, since it was imposed on them as part of the treaty, they said it would require an Offering of Seven. This has flexible connotations, and is often some innocent animal lives, but this time it's an issue that requires human lives. It's not tit-for-tat; it's a matter of sacred execution rituals of sufficient number to answer very ancient traditions – to “seven” something (as a verb) in Semitic tongues was to make it sacred. The men didn't have to be directly culpable; they stood to benefit from the crime. By Israeli custom and the Law of Moses, five of those men were not in line of Saul's succession. They were grandsons-in-law, if you will. But by Noahic Law, it was good enough. David was scratching to find even those few.

The action of Rizpah was quite honorable. They were hung under Noah's Law, so it's different from what happens under Israel's Covenant Law. Since the whole point of the sacrifice of these men was to move God to make it rain, she stood watch to keep the carcasses from being picked over and carried off by scavengers. Nobody was keeping her from taking them down, but she knew she had to wait until it did rain, to indicate God's favor was restored, when she was free to have them buried. Her action reminded David of some unfinished business, which apparently also contributed to the wrath they all faced. So David went and gathered the remains of Saul and Jonathan and performed the obligatory rituals (Deuteronomy 21:22-23).

These two actions together settled some old blood debts in order to cleanse the land. If we don't understand how blood guilt can be inherited, we cannot understand how to avert the wrath of God. This is a covenant obligation that falls on both the individual in one way, and upon the covenant community in another way. It explains how the sin of Adam and Eve is imputed to the whole human race. It explains how the Blood of Christ cleanses us, because we are adopted into

the family that paid the blood price.

2 Samuel 24

We need a couple of background reminders before this narrative makes any sense. Exodus 30:11-16 is where God gives instructions about taking a census. This was during the march from Egypt to the Promised Land, when technically God Himself was the King of Israel, and Moses was merely His viceroy, in terms of governing authority. When God orders a census, there will be a census, because it is His nation. The census always came with a Temple tax that could be hard for some to bear. Modern notions of fairness and equality do not reflect God's mind about divine justice.

It was David's nature to be humble about God anointing him king. He was always a shepherd at heart. He genuinely loved the nation of Israel and suffered the pangs of sorrow any literal father would over the people. This was why he was such a fierce warrior on their behalf, and kept saying what a mighty and wonderful nation they were.

God used Satan to provoke David to call a census without God's actual command. David slipped into a kind of pride that was quite uncharacteristic of him. It caused him to move away from his typical passionate concern for their welfare. He wanted a body count of able men who could be conscripted. The text does not say specifically, but apparently this time David did not collect the Temple tax. There's no other explanation possible for why it kindled God's wrath. For all his moral weaknesses, Joab for once understood what a mistake this was. It wasn't like David to demand something that could only reflect pride, and it was certainly contrary to Covenant Law.

You can find any number of commentaries that speculate about other moral flaws that counted against David in this command, but most of them are unwarranted. They tend toward attempting to justify it all from a Western standard of justice. But from a genuine Hebrew point of view, it's enough to note the obvious facts from Scripture here: David was the king and his sins could bring God's wrath on the people, much to his chagrin.

The journey described gives us a hint to the method: The command staff would set up camp in several convenient central locations based on the terrain and hold musters of the able-bodied adult men in that area. The census is recorded in the text in round numbers, typical of Hebrew writing for something like this.

Then the blinders were off and David realized what a massive mistake he had made. He had exposed the people to God's wrath by not taking the Temple tax. Keep in mind, there was no reason at all for a Temple tax, as there was neither Temple nor Tabernacle at this time. The Ark of Covenant was sitting in a Tent of Meeting in his palace courtyard. David's cry of repentance is not as self-oriented as it sounds to us in English. With his normal moral sensitivity restored to him, David felt the full load of a shepherd's guilt who had set his own flock on fire. He wanted to take the blame on himself alone.

Upon God's message, David could not decide between a long famine or a quick and deadly plague, but didn't want to run the risk of another flight in the wilderness from human enemies, not at his now advanced age. So the Lord chose the plague and it cost a significant element of that mighty army he mustered over the previous month or so.

In very dramatic imagery we are told that the death angel approached David's capital and stopped just outside the city on a threshing floor that was once the place where Abraham

prepared to offer Isaac. The Lord didn't recall the angel, but had him stop in place. David was permitted to see this angel, and his heartfelt cry on behalf of the people is altogether typical of him.

Gad told David his duty now was to erect an altar of sacrifice on that same spot Abraham had used. At this time, it was the threshing floor of a loyal Jebusite noble still living in the area, here called Araunah. It happened he was there on his threshing floor that day. As he spotted the king's entourage approaching, he paid his lawful respects. Notice the very thoughtful answer the man gave to his king upon hearing the reason for this visit. The text notifies us that Araunah was not a convert, but a resident alien who ruled over some of his own Jebusite people.

It would hardly be any kind of sacrifice for David to accept the generous offer, even though it would have been part of Araunah's feudal obligations. The ritual would have to come at some personal cost to David to have any meaning. David's offering had to be under Moses' Law, not the Noahic Law binding on the Jebusties. So far as anyone can say, David paid a premium price for a parcel of land with the oxen and materials. This offering was accepted and the Lord recalled the death angel.

If nothing else, this serves as the moral model of biblical manhood. Men will always fail, and those who really do take on a heavy load of care will be even more tempted than others. But the sense of personal loss felt over the souls of others is what distinguishes a shepherd from ordinary guys.

1 Kings 1

This is a long read, but there are important elements of feudalism in how this all happened. We need to establish that Eastern feudalism is a prerequisite for the Covenant.

David had 20 sons; 11 were considered in line for the throne. Amnon was the eldest, killed by his half-brother Absalom for raping Tamar, and then rejecting her. Kileab was second, and is hardly mentioned, indicating he probably died young. Third was Absalom, who died in battle against his own father. Fourth, and surviving eldest son, was Adonijah.

David was suffering from hypothermia, a common ailment in elderly people – he could no longer generate enough heat on his own. The customs of the day called for a young woman who was technically part of the harem, but would remain eligible for marriage later, since her only service to the King was sharing her body heat.

Adonijah declared himself regent, meaning he ruled on behalf of his father. His father wasn't dead, but was inactive, and David had never formally announced the nomination of Solomon as his successor. So Adonijah played it up with aping Absalom's habit of having a boisterous company of soldiers running down the road to clear the way for his chariots. He enlisted key figures in the royal court to support his pretense of being regent.

However, other more significant figures didn't join this party. Adonijah decided to host a feast to celebrate the announcement of taking up the regency. He chose a collection of buildings standing on or near the En-rogel Spring as the site for this feast. It stands down just below where the Kidron and Hinnom Valleys run together south of David's capital.

Adonijah excluded the court prophet, Nathan, along with Benaiah, David's chief of security, and Solomon, his youngest royal brother. From what we can tell, Solomon was not yet regarded as an adult (roughly 30 years old), so that would have been his excuse. This is probably why

David had delayed the official vestment. However, the whole picture is one of Adonijah knowing his position wasn't all that secure.

Nathan as Court Prophet was more aware of the political maneuvering than anyone else. His exclusion from the party didn't keep him from overhearing all the planning and plotting. On top of that, he had the prophetic gift of insight into the meanings of these things. He warned Solomon's mother, Bathsheba, of the threat this activity meant to her. Adonijah was no better than Abasalom when it came to plotting the murder his rivals, along with anyone else who got in his way, once David actually died.

Nathan also knew how to get David's attention. He advised Bathsheba to have an audience with the King about this matter. Nathan would then come in the door behind her and also discuss it with David in his own official capacity. David got the point; freezing or not, he had to rise far enough physically to conduct some official business. So he called Bathsheba back in and confirmed his promise to her about Solomon. He was going to publicly vest Solomon as regent that very day.

David ordered the proper rituals so that this was done right. It included his own marked mule and all the pomp. The ritual would take place at the Gihon Spring, the actual water source for the fortress, and perhaps the rest of the city. At a minimum, this is where public proclamations took place, but it was also just below the terrace where the Ark of Covenant stood. Thus, once the solemn ritual took place, Solomon would ride into the eastern gate of the citadel with music and shouting. Every element was symbolic of royalty coming to claim his throne. Then the ritual would end with Solomon literally taking possession of David's throne.

Try to imagine the scene with Adonijah's party, hearing the *shofar* wailing down the valley at him. Then he looks up to see this coronation with all the most ancient rituals, and the population of the city celebrating with priests in attendance, along with the King's own official bodyguard (Cherethites and Pelethites) in their unique uniforms.

Add to that the announcement from the son of the Priest, and the festivities at En-rogel simply died. Everyone quietly parted from there in different directions. By this time there was a small stone altar in front of the Ark of Covenant, and Adonijah made his way there to grasp two of the horns poking up at the corners. This was to symbolize his capitulation; no one was going to execute him at the altar for his act of rebellion at the risk of God's wrath. He announced his petition to spare his life.

When Solomon learned of this, he agreed on certain terms. If Adonijah would walk by the Covenant and humbly embrace his lot at the decision of his own father, then he was safe. If he continued to show arrogance, he would not live long. So on those terms, Adonijah was escorted from the altar to Solomon's throne, where he fell on his face according to proper protocol. Solomon dismissed him in peace; "Go home."

2 Kings 2:1-35

David knew his time was gone. He held one last audience with his heir, Solomon. The first word of advice was that Solomon should be a better man. David was subtly confessing that he had allowed too many things to slip, failing to take vigorous action to preserve *shalom* in his kingdom. We will see no lack of men in authority too eager to shed blood for some pretense of justice, but good men will always hesitate. David had hesitated too long and too often.

And the best way to be strong was to faithfully execute the Covenant of Moses. The resulting

blessings would ensure that God's promise to David would stand, and that his dynasty would remain on the throne. That promise rested on the faithfulness of his successors, so David did all he could to fire Solomon's own passion for obedience to the Word.

The first bequest was an order to execute David's cousin Joab. David's war minister had murdered two men who sought to serve in David's court. It is rightly described as fighting an unjustified war against allies. There was blood guilt that must be paid to assure peace with God.

David asked Solomon to show special favor to the clan of Barzillai of Gilead, for being a faithful supporter during Absalom's revolt, when no one else seemed to care. He also declared a warrant against Shimei, but left it to Solomon's own wisdom how to handle it. Then David died and Solomon was confirmed as king. Further, Solomon took steps to ensure his position was never in doubt.

But Adonijah wasn't ready to give up on his ambition to usurp the throne. It seems he thought it would be easier to engage in court intrigue by currying the Queen Mother's favor. While the text says nothing about Bathsheba's attitude, it certainly seems she already knew how this would turn out. However, she played along because she wanted her son to know what was happening behind the scenes.

So when she came to see him, Solomon set a new precedent. This custom was kept for a long time after: The Queen Mother was placed on a second throne in the royal court. This formally recognized her authority as ruler over the palace and all its internal affairs. Solomon was signaling that she had unquestioned authority in the royal household and domestic matters.

Recall that Abishag was the nurse brought in to serve David until his death. While she remained a virgin, she was properly part of David's harem. Her hand was his to give. Solomon inherited that harem. His mother was now the manager over that, as well, but she was pretending to play along with Adonijah's folly in asking Solomon for Abishag's hand on his behalf.

Solomon's response is rightfully sarcastic. "Why don't you save time and request my throne on his behalf?" This was precisely what Adonijah was aiming at, and marrying any woman regarded as a royal concubine to the preceding king was symbolic of claiming the throne. To Solomon it showed that Adonijah was preparing yet more intrigue and politicking, trying to finagle his way onto the throne. And while she was at it, maybe she could request mercy for Joab and Abiathar? Her authority didn't reach that far.

So Solomon responded with an oath, that he should suffer severely at God's hand if he didn't execute divine justice on these men. First, he sent Benaiah, chief of the Royal Bodyguard, with a decree to execute Adonijah immediately. For Abiathar, out of respect for his service to God, he was allowed to live, but forcibly retired from the priesthood. The text notes that this was the final fulfillment of the curse on Eli, who was High Priest when Samuel entered the Lord's service, and had embarrassed the Lord by failing to rein in his two sons' corrupt behavior. A prophet warned Eli that his heirs would die early and be replaced by another priestly dynasty. Deposing Abiathar, as the sole living descendent of Eli, removed him from the curse.

Side note: There is some dispute about whether Abiathar was High Priest. Since there was no Temple, only a tabernacle pitched over the Ark in the courtyard of David's citadel, it's doubtful anyone actually claimed that office during the interim between the Tabernacle in Shiloh and Solomon's Temple. He's not mentioned as such in the text. However, Abiathar would have been the High Priest if there was one. Upon his forced retirement, with no male heirs, the role passed to Zadok, whose family never failed to produce a valid heir to the High Priesthood until the

Temple was destroyed by Rome.

The case of Joab was not so simple. As soon as Joab heard what happened to his other co-conspirators, he ran to the tabernacle at the citadel and held onto the horns on the altar. After some back and forth, Solomon declared that he could die there at the altar, since his blood was demanded by God Himself.

Benaiah was promoted to commander of the army and Zadok was promoted to the senior priesthood position.

1 Kings 3

So Solomon takes the throne of Israel and marries the daughter of Pharaoh. He had early set men to work on his capital, building a palace, a city wall, and of course, the Temple. In the meantime, the royal quarters were still in the ancient citadel. So was the Ark of the Covenant. Without an appointed sacred place to worship, it was hard to demand that the people worship only at the altar of Jehovah.

There was a temporary altar in the citadel, but this Tent of Meeting was not properly laid out with all the officially sanctioned furnishings, and was not publicly accessible. It was very risky to come anywhere near the Ark in the first place. So it's no surprise that the people sought out alternative sites to meet with their God. And because the rituals for Baal worship were so very similar, we should not be surprised that things were a little mixed up. The narrative is not particularly condemnatory about this state of affairs.

Solomon, in his zeal for the Lord, chose to conduct his ceremony on the site at the top of Gibeon's mountain, an ancient place of worship. Since pagan idolatry was flatly forbidden, any previous temples and shrines were gone. But such a commanding view evoked a spiritual awareness, and it was far better suited to the mass of burnt offerings Solomon wanted to execute in celebrating his coronation. The Lord wasn't insulted by this choice. Instead, He met with Solomon in a dream to ask what kind of blessing the new king would seek.

Solomon's answer was wisdom in itself. Let's remind ourselves of the meaning of *shalom*. It is typically outlined as reasonable prosperity, safety from enemies, safety from plagues and natural disasters, and social stability. However, that last item is the key in terms of what Covenant leadership should seek. Social stability arising from faithful adherence to the Law is the primary symptom of peace with God. Pursuing that is the best way to get the other blessings. So it was that Solomon essentially asked for that first, in that he begged for the wisdom to make it happen with such a great nation. By asking for the welfare of the Covenant, Solomon gained all the other goodies that humans typically sought.

God promised that Solomon's moral wisdom would exceed that of any previous or succeeding king on this earth. Most Westerners misread the meaning of wisdom, as if it were something very nearly the same as intelligence and factual knowledge. But Solomon had requested to discern the difference between good and evil. This is the only proper understanding of what God gave him here. However, it would naturally offer a wealth of practical understanding of things.

Upon awakening, Solomon realized it was a dream. Obviously he put a lot of stock in that, because he came back to the citadel and offered more offerings on the makeshift altar in the courtyard before the Tent of Meeting. There was no doubt in his mind Who had spoken to him.

The text goes on to give an example of what Solomon's wisdom could do. In the case of two harlots in a dispute over whose son had survived a bad night, Solomon knew what such women were like. He proposed a grisly solution: slicing the living son in half, dividing him between the two. The real mother was just barely mother enough to prefer the infant live at the cost of losing him. The other woman had nothing to lose, and so was clearly not his mother.

The case was celebrated as word got around the whole kingdom. Nobody doubted the wisdom of Solomon nor his fitness to be King.

1 Kings 11

This is a long chapter, and all of it is required to understand a very broad context. However, the key issue in the narrative is just a short section.

Over the previous chapters, we learn that Solomon dramatically changed Israel from a warring loose confederation to a very civilized and united kingdom. We noted previously that the Northern Tribes had long differed somewhat from the Southern in vernacular speech and culture. This was led by the tribe of Ephraim that never seemed to have gotten over certain perceived slights during the Exodus, Conquest and Period of Judges. So while they capitulated to making David king, Solomon managed to reawaken the division.

But first, we must understand why God allowed this division to fester in the first place. It could have gone quite well under Solomon's reign, but for the wisest man in human history, it was another matter to actually walk in his own wisdom. He failed grandly.

We are treated early in the chapter to a long and sad recitation of his moral failures. Like his father David, Solomon was a skirt chaser, but his father had been too busy to indulge that much. David had pacified every nation around, but Solomon had leisure to develop a high culture and art, along with a massive harem. He compromised with his thousand plus wives and concubines, allowing them to keep their idolatrous practices, and even participated himself. In the end, Solomon actually rebuilt a whole host of cults that previous generations had labored so hard to stamp out.

So the narrative warns us gravely that Solomon provoked the Lord's wrath. However, that wrath was tempered by mercy. Nothing really bad would happen during Solomon's reign, but would be inherited by his son. Instead, Solomon's reign was shortened a bit. The heir wouldn't just inherit political instability, but he would be as stupid as Solomon was wise. That was part of the curse, and critical to the longer chain of events.

The previous chapters recount the extravagant building projects of the Temple and the Palace of Cedar (AKA House of the Forest of Lebanon). Those same chapters give us a hint of just how much food the royal palace consumed. It's hard to imagine, and it required Solomon to make a very concerted effort to organize thoroughly and keep the tribute flowing in sufficient quantity. That thousand plus wives and concubines weren't cheap. But then, nothing about Solomon's reign was cheap. Keep that in mind.

So while Solomon didn't face any serious threats to his actual rule, the Lord raised up several significant figures to oppose him and cause some trouble. There was Hadad the Edomite. He was a surviving royal son of Edom who escaped with a small band of supporters from the slaughter dealt out by Joab during David's reign. There weren't many adult Edomite men who survived that war. Hadad went down to Egypt and nursed his hatred for Israel living on

Pharaoh's support. Eventually he went back home to rebuild Edom during Solomon's reign.

Rezon escaped his servitude in Damascus and raised up a raider force that eventually went back and captured that city. He became another thorn in Solomon's side, never submitting and never being driven out.

God also raised up a domestic rival for Solomon. An Ephraimite noble named Jeroboam was talented enough to be hired for royal service. Solomon was the kind of man who knew it was wise to keep the real talented men of his nation close to him so he could watch them. But it's clear that Jeroboam wasn't thrilled with the way Solomon did things. It was part of his duty to insure Solomon had enough bodies for the endless building projects.

I have yet to understand why so very many commentaries avoid discussing verse 27. You won't find much discussion on it. What difference did it make to Jeroboam that Solomon had this one project to expand the Temple plaza ("Millo" – a terrace filled with rubble and dirt) and turn the patchwork protection around Zion and the Temple into a massive single continuous wall? If we understand correctly, this was all one project, as the two structures were merged.

The issue was the business of forced labor as tax. Solomon's taxation was downright vicious, well beyond what God said was appropriate (roughly 10%). The royal labor projects were particularly rough, consuming up to a quarter of the year for every able-bodied man in the nation. Solomon didn't make it easy by taking this labor tax during the off-season, either. It was all year round with every man rotating in and out on a schedule convenient to the royal administration, but hard on the men doing the labor. And this was on top of other taxes levied against their productive work at home.

So what we learn in verse 27 is that the wall and plaza was the straw that broke the camel's back. This was the source of unrest in Solomon's reign. So on a day when Jeroboam left Jerusalem, heading toward his own subordinate tribal headquarters in Ephraim, probably on yet another draft mission to seize more workers, he was met by a prophet in disguise, named Ahijah.

The prophet told Jeroboam what God had planned, and roughly the schedule. The Northern Tribes (later called "Israel") would split from the Kingdom and be given to Jeroboam. The Southern Tribes (called "Judah") would remain under David's dynasty, and all of this would happen only after Solomon had passed. Jeroboam was told in no uncertain terms why God was doing this: idolatry. Thus, if Jeroboam would remain faithful to Jehovah, in contrast to Solomon, he would inherit the promise granted to David regarding a royal dynasty.

Solomon caught wind of this little meeting and sought to arrest Jeroboam and execute him. However, the latter escaped to Egypt. We are then told that Solomon reigned for only forty years. For having started so young, that wasn't a long reign.

1 Kings 12

We may never understand what God had in mind by dividing the Kingdom. What is not in doubt is that both sides of the division utterly failed to take the wiser path. What we have here is a tragedy of the highest order.

Today we use the term "corvee" (*kor-vay*) to describe the system of labor as feudal taxation in the Ancient Near East. We've already discussed how Solomon's demands for labor were unconscionable. The Bible doesn't say much about what would be reasonable, but we know for

sure that Solomon was overbearing and the Israelis resented it.

Solomon had appointed Jeroboam as the minister of labor over Ephraim and Manasseh. At some point Solomon made yet another round of oppressive labor demands, and dispatched Jeroboam along with his peers over other tribes to drag in yet another army of workers. Jeroboam had met a prophet who told him God intended to tear away the Northern Tribes into a separate kingdom, and offered Jeroboam the same deal He had given David. Solomon found out about this and sought to execute Jeroboam to prevent a wider rebellion. The noble from Ephraim fled to Egypt.

Solomon anointed Rehoboam his heir and rested in his grave. Rehoboam decided to hold his coronation at Shechem. This is the ancient city that had been friendly to Israel since before the Conquest, an old sacred site between the two mountains Ebal and Gerizim where the Covenant was celebrated by reciting the blessings and curses. It was also a reasonable choice as a midpoint for a meeting of the tribal and national elders between the northern and southern ends of the Kingdom.

The elders of Ephraim called Jeroboam back from Egypt to represent their interests. His message to Rehoboam was to lighten the excessive load that his father Solomon had levied on them. If he would do that, the Northern Tribes would agree to support his rule. Rehoboam responded that he needed three days to consider his answer. Upon consulting his father's advisers, they counseled him to take them up on the offer. These counselors would have been the first to warn anyone that Solomon had demanded far too much.

Then Rehoboam consulted with his peers, who advised him to be even harder than Solomon had been. It's difficult to imagine the kind of arrogance this represents, but Rehoboam took that message back to the tribal elders of Israel: His little finger would be thicker than Solomon's thigh, and he would exchange the whips for scorpions.

So the Northern Tribes declared they would no longer serve under the House of David, but would form their own separate kingdom. When Rehoboam sent his chief tribute officer to collect the symbolic tribute the tribes had brought with them to Shechem, the elders captured him and stoned him to death. The noise of this wild response caused Rehoboam to flee back to Jerusalem.

He began the process of mobilizing the army to fight this rebellion, but was warned off this course of action by the prophet Shemaiah. Rehoboam heeded this warning and accepted the new state of affairs as the decision of God.

This was tragedy enough, but Jeroboam went back on his word to God. Not trusting in the promises of Jehovah, Jeroboam feared that having the people keep going down to Jerusalem to worship would weaken his position, so he commissioned two rival temples at Bethel and Dan. Being twice the fool, he used in both temples the failed image of the rebellion during Exodus: the Golden Calf. This was poking God in the eye. He also anointed priests who were not Levites.

It's hard to overstate just how awful this whole situation was. Two idiotic kings now face fierce tension and neither was willing to listen to the God who brought them out of slavery. The *shalom* of Israel took a major hit that day. The Southern Kingdom was ruled by a fool and the Northern Kingdom had taken the first step to abandoning the Covenant.

1 Kings 14

We've noted before that the Northern Kingdom had long drifted farther and farther from the Covenant given at Mount Sinai. By the time Solomon passed the throne to his son, she also pulled away from the Davidic Dynasty. Despite the greatness of this tragedy, we could also say that God was doing Judah a favor by removing this massive morally dead weight.

Our narrative opens with King Jeroboam's heir in distress with sickness. So the King directed his wife to visit the Prophet Ahijah in Shiloh, the one who had prophesied that Jeroboam would be king. But he wanted her to disguise herself as a subject, not appearing as Queen. The offering she bore was substantial, but not at all typical of royalty or nobles, who would bring animals or meat.

Keep in mind that virtually nobody did this stuff alone. An aged prophet would live in a larger household with servants and usually family, and the Queen would never travel alone and unguarded, though she might leave her entourage somewhere out of sight to approach the prophet's dwelling with one or two servants carrying her gift. Aside from the lowest peasants, nobody in these narratives went anywhere alone, or did any physical work without assistance. Servants and/or slaves were always there, doing the actual labor attributed to the central characters. It was taken for granted that readers would understand this.

Though he was blind from age, Ahijah had hardly gone deaf to God's Word. Jehovah warned him who was coming and what her mission was. So as she came into the room for an audience, he called out to her by name and gave her a harsh message. Her son was going to die for the sins of his father, but the Lord in His mercy would allow a proper public mourning and burial. No one else from Jeroboam's household would be that lucky. They would all die violent deaths, and be eaten by scavengers.

The whole point was that the God of the Covenant had lifted Jeroboam to his throne, and wasn't kidding about what He expected in return. Jeroboam had refused to serve Jehovah, and raised up his own competing temples with idols, as well as permitting every form of idolatry that had for so long been suppressed. Worse, God had decided already that this Northern Kingdom would someday be taken away into exile and dispersed among the Gentiles, never to be seen or heard again as a people.

Meanwhile, as soon as the Queen got home the boy would die. This happened just as the prophet had said. So the public burial ritual took place, also as he had promised. The narrative then telescopes out and tells us that Jeroboam reigned a total of twenty-two years and died. Another of his sons – Nadab – inherited the throne.

Now we jump to Rehoboam, whose conduct was no better. His reign was five years shorter than Jeroboam's. He never cleaned up his father's legacy of letting the people turn to idolatry. Instead, it got worse and God was highly embarrassed. So during Rehoboam's fifth year on the throne, Pharaoh Shishak (Egyptian *Sheshonq*), who rose to power out of Libya, invaded Judah. Rehoboam bribed him off with the Temple treasures and some of the royal collection. To hide his shame, Rehoboam had bronze shields made to replace those of gold that Shishak had taken. They were guarded just as fiercely as gold to help keep up appearances.

The text notes in passing that the two rival kings had fought skirmishes off and on during their entire shared reigns. Rehoboam's heir was named Abijam.

Over the next two centuries, the kings of Israel went through nine dynasties and nineteen

rulers, and were carried away by Assyria. They had not a single faithful king. Judah continued under the dynasty of David with only one brief interruption, and lasted almost twice as long before their Exile under Babylon. Judah featured a handful of good kings who feared the Lord.

1 Kings 15

This chapter can be very confusing because too many major characters are introduced and dispatched quickly. It's a very unstable period, for the Northern Kingdom in particular. Try not to get too tightly twisted around the names and how they overlap.

Rehoboam was succeeded by Abijam (AKA Abijah) on the throne of Judah. Keeping the custom established by Solomon, he placed his mother in charge of palace domestic management. Her name was Maacah, the granddaughter of Absalom (AKA Abishalom), the rebellious son of David. The passage notes that he also carried on the skirmishes with Israel to the north. Abijah was no wiser than his father, and had a short reign of three years. However, for the sake of David's faithfulness, the Lord ensured that Abijah's heir could take up the royal reins.

The Lord raised up a worthy heir named Asa. We aren't told why, but he left his grandmother Maacah in place as Queen Mother of the Palace. A literal translation would not differentiate between mother and grandmother, because Hebrew language doesn't nit-pick over family relational roles the way Westerners do. This is why we don't take the genealogy tables as literal lineal descent of father to son. It's not uncommon to see several previous generations of ancestors called "mother" or "father." The reader is expected to keep track if it matters.

So Asa was faithful to Jehovah and cleaned up most of the pagan shrines within his domain. His performance was imperfect, but it's clear he loved the Lord and tried to please Him. He eventually deposed his grandmother from her position because of her refusal to get right with God. She had built an obscene pagan shrine to some Asherah, so Asa had it burned publicly right outside the gate of Jerusalem, next to the Kidron Brook. He never got around to all the various hilltop shrines, but the Lord was still impressed.

Sometime during his long reign, there arose a new king of Israel named Baasha. This new guy kept up the hostilities between north and south. He started fortifying a hilltop town just a few miles north of Jerusalem on the ancient ridge top highway, and deep inside Benjamin tribal territory. It would have placed a significant armed force that could blockade most commercial land traffic from the north, and this was about the only reasonable trade route from Mesopotamia into Judah.

Asa hired Ben-hadad of Damascus to attack Baasha from the rear and distract him. It wasn't a good precedent, but it worked. The Syrian forces attacked the border towns of Israel up near the Sea of Galilee, and Baasha had to hurry and move his troops and workforce up that way. Seeing this, Asa mobilized the entire kingdom to quickly seize the building materials and move them to two other sites. Then those materials were promptly used to fortify a couple of towns up on the northern border of Benjamin. Given the nature of the situation, we can safely say that this was not an abuse of the corvee labor system.

Then the narrative switched back to Israel in the north. It backs up to the end of Jeroboam's reign and the rise of his heir, Nadab. Because he was no better than his father, his reign was just two years. He led a military campaign against the old Philistine kingdom at Gibbethon, and during the fighting, Baasha led a revolt against Nadab during the siege. We find out that Baasha was from the Tribe of Issachar.

And true to the prophet's word, Baasha went about slaughtering the entire household of Jeroboam. There was not a single male alive with Jeroboam's DNA. Of course, Baasha was no better than Jeroboam's dynasty, but the Lord had plans for him, so he reigned 24 years. It took a little time to raise up the man God wanted to replace him.

The point here is that, barring specific plans God might have, royal longevity typically reflects whether the king in question was in any degree faithful to the Covenant. There's no need to pick over each and every king from both kingdoms. At some point the Lord allows Israel to have wise and capable kings, though nonetheless evil pagans, to stabilize things just long enough to raise up an empire to destroy them. Judah has a couple of fine servants of God on the throne, so things go better for them.

1 Kings 16:23 - 17:1

We skip over some quick and dirty changes in who reigns over Israel. As noted previously, the Northern Kingdom goes through frequent dynasty changes. Where we pick up is the beginning of the Omride Dynasty.

Omri's reign was twelve years. For half of that, he continued using the palace Jeroboam built in Tirzah. Then he went and bought a hill (along with the surrounding land) from someone named Shemer, as the new site for his royal capital. He named it after the previous owner. Samaria is the English version; in Hebrew it's more like *Shomeron*. Vowel shifts are common in Hebrew, particularly when you name something after someone.

There was a tremendous building program under the Omrides, and the new capital was just the beginning. Omri and his successors also refurbished just about everything Solomon had built in the Northern Kingdom, in part to put their own mark on things. In many foreign records of this period, the term for the Northern Kingdom shows up as "House of Omri" or similar labels, and they stuck long after his dynasty ended.

But what matters to us is how he continued in Jeroboam's footsteps in keeping the two rival shrines open in Dan and Bethel. Thus, the prophetic scribes who wrote 1 and 2 Kings noted little else.

Omri's heir was Ahab. He continued his father's building program, and the text notes that he also introduced more abominations. He took for his queen Jezebel, a fanatical advocate of pagan idolatry. The narrative gives us the heart of the matter, but not the complicated story of how Jehovah's name was used for a lot of things that He hated. The prophetic authors talk about Baal and Asherah because that was essentially what kind of pagan practices were observed under Ahab, despite how Jehovah's name appeared on some of the shrines and celebrations. The rituals bore some similarities to the worship of Jehovah, but He was properly worshiped only in Jerusalem.

Foreign rulers never quite grasped the finer points of this issue. As far as they were concerned, the God of Israel was still named Jehovah. That's because in their daily speech and correspondence, Israelis still used derivatives of Jehovah's name, but were often talking about pagan idolatry. It was further confused because the official names of these people still echoed with references to Jehovah.

There is a sort of footnote at the end of the chapter here about Jericho. Someone named Hiel (Hebrew *Chiel*), from the shrine city of Bethel, went down to the site of Jericho and proceeded to rebuild the ruins. As promised in Joshua 6:26, when his servants began this task, his firstborn

son died. By the time he set the gates to finish the work, his youngest son died.

We end with just the first verse of the next chapter. We are introduced to the prophet Elijah. He hailed from middle Gilead, from the village Tishbe, about half-way down the wadi that contained the Brook Cherith. This prophet was sent to warn Ahab that his provocations justified a total drought on the Northern Kingdom. The implication of what Elijah says is that unless Ahab turns to the true God of Israel and appeals to Elijah as His prophet for relief, there would be none. None of the pagan idols Ahab worshiped could help him.

1 Kings 18

Three and a half years is the ancient symbol of tribulation. God's choice for how long the drought lasted speaks volumes to anyone of Hebrew heritage. Elijah had survived the famine starting out near his hometown on the Wadi Cherith until the drought had taken away any residual flow. Then He spent the balance of the time in Zarephath in the home of a widow. This was a coastal town in Phoenicia between Tyre and Sidon. When the time comes to confront Ahab, Elijah comes to find him staying in his winter palace in Jezreel.

Keep in mind: Ahab is king, but his wife Jezebel is the driving force behind the throne. We get the impression that he's only as forceful as she wants him to be. He's not a cartoon figure about it, but surprisingly lax on his own, or even wimpy at times.

Elijah first encounters the King's Chamberlain, named Obadiah. This man happened to be faithful to Jehovah. He had privately and secretly funded the maintenance of a hundred surviving prophets of Jehovah in a couple of caves somewhere in the kingdom to spare them the murderous slaughter at the insistence of Jezebel. We have no idea how many did not escape her clutches, but it would have been quite a few. The population of the Northern Kingdom was roughly three million or more at this time, and there would have been plenty of active prophets from several generations supporting their mission. Keep in mind that Samuel had built several prophets' academies a couple centuries prior to this, dividing them between Israel and Judah.

So Ahab took a bunch of servants, and Obadiah another bunch, and they spread out in opposite directions from the Jezreel palace, looking for any sign of greenery to indicate where they might find water and feed for the domestic service animals. Obadiah had not gone far when he encountered Elijah. The text in Hebrew notes with emphasis just what a shock this was for the chamberlain.

Elijah instructed him to call his lord, but Obadiah was reluctant. This was not a good time to provoke the king with a goose chase after a prophet notorious for disappearing the way Elijah did. Ahab, under pressure from Jezebel, had sent emissaries searching for Elijah to all the weaker neighboring kingdoms, demanding they swear an oath that they had searched and not found the prophet. But Elijah promised he would camp out right on that spot because he had a word from the Lord to deliver to Ahab. So Obadiah delivered the message and Ahab went back to meet Elijah.

Ahab made a tart comment about how Elijah had caused all kinds of trouble for the kingdom, implying that the drought was Elijah's fault. But the prophet reminded him that the only trouble in Israel came from betraying the God who had made it such a powerful nation and gave them the land. Seeing that Ahab was leading the nation to serve the various imaginary manifestations of the sky god Baal, the same deity who had failed to bring rain during the past few years, he should call the prophets to come and represent their deities against this lone

prophet of Jehovah on Mount Carmel, one of the major sites of Baal worship.

Given how these things go, we can bet that 450 prophets of Baal, along with 400 prophets of the Asherah, all sumptuously supported by Jezebel, would be a fair equivalence of how many prophets of Jehovah she had slaughtered. Elijah was proposing a test that no one could ignore.

Keep in mind that it took several days for this meeting to be arranged. Messengers went out across Ahab's domain, announcing this big event. While it's simply impossible that every resident would have liberty to come up to Mount Carmel, we can be sure a representative sample of ruling elders, nobles, and other people of leisure showed up. Mount Carmel has several peaks divided by ravines, some rather steep. There would have been among these peaks a common ancient shrine where a large number of people could gather to watch. When the crowds came, the chief leaders would have been in the front rows. Elijah confronted them with a question as to whether they would make a choice, but they stared in silence.

So this test was arranged in the idolaters' favor. They got to choose from two bulls for their offering, and would go first in calling on their deity to send fire from the sky. Was he not the lord of the heavens? They did their thing from mid-morning to noon, when Elijah mocked them. So they went into a frenzy, which was common in their rituals, for another couple of hours. Nothing happened with the offering. When the prophets wearied, Elijah called the people away from their altar and asked them to assemble before the place where he had waited for this show to wind down.

Tradition tells us that the "evening offering" was around 3PM by our reckoning. At this time, Elijah gathered the uncut stones from the old altar to Jehovah; this altar had been desecrated some decades previously when the worship of Baal was restored under Jeroboam. The symbolism of twelve stones for the Twelve Tribes was a poignant reminder that Jehovah was God of the whole nation, not just Judah. It was an elaborate ritual in itself just to set things up. This included digging a trench that could hold something like 20 liters of water. Then he cut up the bull and had water poured over it repeatedly until the trench was full.

His prayer was simple, asking that God remind all the observers present that He was the only real God, and that He had commissioned Elijah to speak for Him. The fire fell and consumed everything down to the ground, including the altar, evaporating all the water in the process. The people duly prostrated themselves before Jehovah, declaring Him to be the one true God of Israel. Upon this highly emotional moment, Elijah commanded that the prophets of Baal and Asherah be seized. The people took them into custody, and Elijah led them down the slope on the northeast side of Carmel to the Wadi Kishon, where these idolaters were slaughtered. This was exactly what the Covenant demanded.

Ahab stood by and let all of this happen, of course. Had he been a man of real action, he could hardly have restrained Elijah from commanding the people like that after such an embarrassing demonstration of how wrong the king was. So Elijah advised the king to go back up to the spot on the hill where he parked his chariots and eat his picnic dinner, because Elijah could hear a heavy downpour coming.

With nothing better to do at that moment, Ahab went back up and did so. Elijah then went back up to the big flat spot where the fire had fallen from the sky and began praying with his face between his knees on the ground. He sent a servant to check from the higher peak, gazing out toward the Mediterranean Sea to find any clouds. Each time the servant came back to announce there was nothing, Elijah prayed a little longer, and then sent him again – seven times. When the

servant finally reported seeing a tiny patch of cloud over the sea to the west, Elijah sent his servant to warn Ahab to pack his stuff and head back to Jezreel, lest he be caught in a storm.

That single cloud rapidly spread into a massive rain front that blew on shore. So Ahab headed down the winding road that dropped down the slope and into the valley below. Elijah was miraculously empowered and ran straight down the side of the mountain on foot, then continued loping cross-country, along the fifteen miles or so of fairly flat plain to the City of Jezreel. He arrived ahead of Ahab's chariot convoy, and was able to announce in the city gates what had happened up on Mount Carmel.

1 Kings 19

Sometimes we need to remind ourselves to think like an ancient Hebrew in order to get a better picture of what the text of the Bible is telling us. For example, it's not necessary to envision Moses directly on the one and only Mount Sinai. The Hebrew language was never meant to be that precise, so it could have been any of several high peaks in that area. Nor is it necessary to assume that Horeb and Sinai are the exact same peak, but rather the same general place where several mountains run together.

Somewhere in this general vicinity was the Burning Bush and the stone Moses struck to bring forth water. Today there are shrines all over the area claiming to mark each of these features. Personally, I'm convinced that God avoided that kind of precision because it takes a small mind to be like that, and small minded people would idolize the place instead of the God who made the place. If you went out there today, it's for sure you could hike up every peak in the area and experience God's Presence pretty much the same on each one. What's important is to realize that God called people there to meet with them, and in our lesson this time, it's Elijah the Prophet who hiked down into the area.

So after Elijah had outrun Ahab to the city gates at Jezreel to testify to the triumph of Jehovah on Mount Sinai, I'm sure he basked in the celebration of those who were yet faithful to the one true God of Israel. Meanwhile, Ahab came home and reported everything to his wife and high priestess. It mattered to her not a whit what God had done. For her, this was a hard-driven commitment to destroy the worship of Jehovah in Israel. So she sent a messenger to Elijah with a very real threat to treat him the way he had treated her acolytes. Nobody, man or deity, would stand in the way of her plan to enslave the Northern Kingdom to the worship of her chosen deities.

Given Jezebel's known behavior, Elijah decided it was time to get out of her jurisdiction. He fled to Judah. Not just Judah, but he fled to the far southern edge of civilization in Judah, to the well and village at Beersheba. He left his attendant there in town and moved a day's hike off into the wilderness to protect the man from being seen with him by any of Jezebel's spies searching for the prophet. He camped out under a broom tree, a bush that can grow almost tree sized with a thick foliage to protect from the heat of the day.

Elijah had gone from the heights of exultation to the depths of despair. We can imagine he expected Jezebel to be humbled by his victory on Mount Carmel, but she was not just any woman. She was demon driven, and no evil was beneath her. Truth never was a consideration for her; it was all about the power. Elijah's expectations were misguided. And to be honest, he should have stayed to face her wrath, for the same God who atomized the offering and altar on Mount Carmel could have protected Elijah. The prophet was about to learn that hard lesson.

So Elijah awoke from his siesta at the touch of an angel. The angel invited him to eat the meal prepared, a big slab of flat bread cooking on a flat stone above a fire. There was a clay jug of water near his head. So Elijah consumed the meal, then fell asleep again. The meal was repeated again, but the angel noted the second time that Elijah would need the nourishment for his big journey – a pilgrimage to Mount Horeb where it all began some centuries ago with Moses.

It depends on where you think Mount Horeb is, but the journey was at least 150 miles (240km). Elijah felt no need to eat again, but hiked the whole way and spent a very long time in a cave in that area, perhaps the same one where God kept Moses from being killed as He passed by in all His divine glory. The Lord was about the manifest Himself again.

A Word from the Lord asked Elijah why he was there. His reply was a note of self-pity, but no more hyperbolic than would be typical in the mouth of any other Hebrew. Still, it was not accurate, in that Elijah claimed there was no one else to stand for God in Ahab's kingdom (Jezebel's actually). As you can see in later chapters, there are others, and will be many more eager for the training when Elijah starts an academy. But at this point, Elijah comes very close to accusing God of allowing His message to be silenced. Why had God not already taken this evil woman down?

So the Lord called Elijah to come out and stand at the entrance to the cave. Now, what happens next is more a miracle of timing than of the nature of the events. There is a massive string of fault lines running through the Gulf of Aqaba and up the rift valley past the Sea of Galilee. The place was then, and still today is, notorious for earthquakes. We also know that some earthquakes come right behind a major storm, though we aren't sure how they relate. And after an earthquake, no one is surprised to see lava being tossed in the air. So all of these events were common enough for Elijah to recognize that there was no particular message from God in them.

It was an exercise of faith to stand in the face of all that threat. However, when the quiet sound like a voice came past the cave, Elijah knew that was a sign of God's Presence. He therefore covered his face as the proper protocol before a great Lord. It was a confession that he was unfit to gaze upon God's face.

It's not obvious from any English translation, but when Elijah was asked again why he was there, his answer was in the same words, but not the same tone. Now he is confessing the truth of the situation, and waiting on God to give the next command.

And that command was to hike around the east side of the Jordan Valley to Damascus, outside of Jezebel's easy reach. In Damascus he was to anoint Hazael (an established figure) as the future King of Syria. Then he was to find Jehu (a high ranking nobleman serving in Ahab's army) to become the next King of Israel. Then he was to go and find Elisha and anoint him as his own successor.

It wasn't disobedience to contact Elisha first. The command to anoint the other two could legitimately be passed on to Elijah's successor, who did eventually perform the rituals later. The point was not that Elijah had to handle these matters personally, but that they were a part of his office, not simply a discrete mission. Elijah would oversee the prophetic ministry that would declare to the human authorities what God's plans were for them. God told Elijah that the wicked fools currently reigning would be punished through human agency that He controlled, whether it be Hazael, Jehu or Elisha, and God wanted everyone conscious of His authority to steer things.

But just to get Elijah's facts straight, God told him there were a good 7000 who still did not

worship idols in Israel. That's a tiny number, when just the able-bodied soldiers alone amounted to over a million under Ahab's command, never mind the civilian population on top of that. So the number of faithful was small, but it wasn't just one.

Elisha was from the town of Abel-meholah, just a short way up a wadi from the Jordan Valley, on the West Bank, not too awfully far from the old royal capital of Tirzah in Ephraim. The area includes a wide flat, arable space in the wadi just above the Jordan Valley and eastern end of the Jezreel Valley.

It never required more than two oxen to pull a single plow. The narrative depicts Elisha guiding one of twelve plows, and was likely near the road. Elijah walks by almost unnoticed and drops his cloak on Elisha, without a word. It was a common symbolic act; Elisha was literally "vested" with the symbol of Elijah's authority. The younger man understood immediately what it all meant, and no one could mistake Elijah – a hairy athletic man who was famous for wearing a camel-hair tunic and wide leather belt holding it down. The tunic was rather like wool, but a distinctive light brown color and a little more coarse, even fuzzy. It was also a common symbol of mourning for sin.

In more practical terms, Elijah was handing Elisha the heavier outer cloak to carry for him, as if the younger man was his personal attendant. Elisha was hardly insulted, but ran after the prophet who was still walking along the road as if nothing had happened. Elisha begged for a chance to celebrate his new appointment with his family, something that might easily take a week or two. It was a tacit invitation for Elijah to come and stay for the festivities. Elijah's answer was something along the lines of warning Elisha this was hardly a social promotion. It was an invitation to accept a harsh service with a man who was known for austere habits.

As a part of this exchange, we should assume the prophet told Elisha where he was headed. The younger man went back and, as son of the owner of the field and equipment, slaughtered his oxen team and used the wood of the plow to boil up a large stew. It was common to have a lean-to field kitchen out there somewhere, so he cooked up a celebratory meal that was also somewhat an offering to God. Once he had shared it out, he took off in the direction Elijah had gone. The narrative says he became Elijah's personal attendant.

Part of the reason for the austerity in Elijah's manner was a tacit declaration that he did not profit from this ministry. He lived close to the bone to make it clear there was no bribery to induce his message. Modern Western scholars quickly reduce a part of this whole thing with Jezebel to mere politics, but her driven demeanor points to something more religious and demonic.

It's a common depiction of what feminism looked like in the Old Testament. It was consistently condemned as defiling the true God of Israel to have a woman blasphemously equated to Him, in the sense of worshiping female deities. However, the rituals for those female deities were consistently and exceedingly vulgar and depraved. Hebrew Scripture thus paints any hint of feminism and female deities together as a major defilement. Jezebel is a classic archetype of this kind of thing.

1 Kings 21

We skip over the previous chapter, but we note in passing that Jehovah twice rescued Ahab from the hands of the Syrian king. Yet Ahab failed to execute the Lord's justice against his enemy, and was condemned for it. We see, then, that Ahab began to fear Jehovah despite being

unwilling to defy his wife and serve Him.

So we come to the story of Naboth's Vineyard. It's necessary that we understand a couple of things to get a picture of what happened. First, grapevines need to be grown on a hillside so that each row of vines gets the same full measure of sunlight. Second, we know that the site of Jezreel is on the far end of a long, curving ridge that falls away from the peak of Mount Gilboa. The ridge snakes around, curving away WNW from the crest. The royal palace would have been somewhere on this final hump above the Jezreel Valley plain, so that Naboth's vineyard was likely on the slope below the city. Current archaeology digs suggest it was the northeastern section of the hump.

Ahab decided that this would make a great vegetable garden, so he offered Naboth a deal. The man turned him down, citing what he believed was a sacred duty to keep this ancient clan possession in the family. This put Ahab in a bad mood, showing yet another of his character flaws. Like a whiny child, he went home and refused to eat. When his wife inquired of the cause of this petulance, he told about Naboth's refusal. Under the Covenant, the man had every right to keep his land, even against the wishes of the king.

But Jezebel cared not a whit about God's Law, and suggested Ahab wasn't acting regally. So she promised him she would get the land for him, which put him in a better mood. Then she issued a decree using Ahab's seal. There would be a day of fasting to the God she despised. Naboth was to be brought up on public charges of blasphemy of God and cursing the King. Both were capital crimes under Moses. She instructed the leaders to secretly commission a couple of false witnesses. Our text refers to them as "Sons of Belial." While a direct translation implies they were worthless, it should be easy to recognize that it refers to someone who serves ("sons of...") a worthless deity. It's no surprise that Belial eventually becomes a nickname for Satan.

It was two men, the minimum necessary for a show trial to condemn an innocent man, under the Law of a God that the man respected, but which no one else present feared at all. Naboth was stoned (buried in a pit under a pile of rocks) and his property became forfeit to the King. So Jezebel told him to go and seize it. As he was doing so, taking stock of what he had gained, the Prophet Elijah showed up.

The Lord had given a word to Elijah about this crime, and told him to deliver a condemnation to the King. When Elijah showed up, Ahab had no doubt why the prophet was there. His question implies that he had been found out, caught red-handed, as we would say. Elijah said it was easy to do, since Ahab had so publicly sold himself to Satan, and it was certainly no secret to God, who knows and tells. Ahab had brought evil to Israel, so God would bring evil to Ahab.

Like Jeroboam and Baasha before him, the Lord would wipe out Ahab's Dynasty. The Lord had told Elijah that Ahab would die in the same place Naboth had. Keep in mind that there was not a single pet dog in Palestine in those days; all of them were wild and dangerous. They would gladly lick up any blood spilled on the ground. So these dogs would also eat Jezebel at the foot of her palace walls, as well, and anyone of Ahab's family who died near a city. Men who died in the open would be bird food. Ahab had reached the zenith of evil simply by virtue of having no particular will at all, just obeying his wife.

Those two had engaged in the vile and despicable pagan worship of the Canaanites God had wanted to drive out the land in the first place. When Ahab heard this message, he promptly went back to the palace and repented in sackcloth and ashes. He believed just enough in Jehovah's power to suffer no doubts about the word of Elijah. While we might grant that Ahab

had no real change of heart, only fear in the context, that was enough. Notice what God says here: Ahab had humbled himself, and had given glory to Jehovah. So God relented insofar as He would let Ahab die normally, but then bring all the curses on his heir.

Notice that mercy is available for people even when their hearts aren't pure before the Lord. Plain old fear and reverence is enough to reap at least a measure of *shalom* God promises to the covenant community. The issue has always been God's glory.

2 Kings 2

Ahab passes from the scene in a battle Jehovah warned him not to pursue. Judah also goes through a royal succession. Ahab's son dies after falling from the roof of the palace, smashing through the lattice screen on one side of the shady breeze room on the second floor. He had sent messengers to inquire of Beelzebub, the god of Ekron down in Philistine territory, which provoked Jehovah to let him die from his wounds. His son succeeds him.

We see that God is able to protect Elijah from Jezebel. More so, we discover in our text today that the prophet was able to establish several prophetic academies where men could learn how to restore the prophetic ministry of the God of Israel. Meanwhile, Elisha continues to serve him as his understudy.

On the day that God planned to take Elijah home, the prophet really wanted to be alone, but Elisha shadowed him closely. Both men knew what was coming, and the bond between them was very strong. They had been at the other Gilgal, up near Shiloh. Elijah asked Elisha to stay there while he headed down on some errand to Bethel, a few miles south of there. It was a hardy hike along the central ridge of Palestine, mostly the ancient trade highway.

Right there in the City of Bethel, where Jeroboam had built one of his pagan shrines, one of Elijah's prophetic academies existed, and the students came out to meet them. They mentioned the impending departure of Elijah to Elisha, something they were able to discern from their studies. Elisha shushed them, most likely because he already had enough weighing on him at that moment.

Next, Elijah proposed to head down the wadi to Jericho. Again he tried to get Elisha to stay, but without success. This was a much longer hike through the winding route at the bottom of the wadi, and they would have come out of the canyon just above the ancient campsite of Gilgal on the left, and Jericho's mound on the right. Both were surrounded by verdant fields and groves in the lush Jordan Valley. Again, at Jericho was another school of Jehovah's prophets.

They told Elisha the same thing, that today he would lose his "head" – his master, Elijah. And again, Elisha hushed such talk. Everyone could feel how close it was. Then Elijah said he needed to go down to the river. While its course has wandered over the centuries, it was probably about a 5 mile hike to the banks. The sun by now was just starting to leave a bit of shadow in pockets around the hills to the west. Again, Elisha refused to let the elder prophet go alone.

Elijah's mantle had long been a symbol of his authority, easily recognized by anyone who had heard of him. It's not likely he was wearing it, but Elisha was carrying it for him as part of their luggage. The old man took it out and rolled it up lengthwise, forming a large flexible tube. He stepped close to the water's edge and slapped it downward on the surface of the slow moving flow. The water pulled back both directions from the spot and left a strip of dry bed for them to cross.

On the far side of the riverbed, as the water flowed back into its course, Elijah turned and asked if there was any bequest his assistant might desire. Elisha replied that he wanted to fully inherit the spiritual authority of his master, referring to the double portion of a firstborn heir. Elijah replied that it was not his to grant, but if Elisha saw his master physically depart, then he could know it was granted.

Sure enough, as they strolled along the east bank of the river, a glowing chariot pulled by glowing horses appeared from the sky and landed near them. This vision of light pushed between the two men, and Elijah was escorted aboard to ride in it. Then, with a noisy whirring of wind that tugged at Elisha's clothing, the chariot rose into the sky. Elisha shouted to Elijah that he could see the chariot and horses of Jehovah, a symbol of how very important the elder prophet was to God. The apparition faded into the sky.

Sometime during this miraculous vision, Elijah had shrugged off that cloak. It was a further symbol that God was making Elisha his successor and heir. Elisha picked up the heavy garment and repeated what his master had done, rolling it up like a carpet and slapping the water of the river. Again, the water curled back and Elisha crossed on dry ground.

This wasn't some kind of silly game. The entire student body from the prophet's academy had climbed up to some high ground where they could watch this whole scene. Elijah demonstrated his authority, and Elisha came back wielding the same power. As their new master came back toward them, they ran to meet him. Exulting in what they had seen, they treated Elisha as their new headmaster of the school. They would have been quick to notify the other branches of the school.

But then they harassed him about going to look for the body of Elijah. This was not far from where the Lord had ordered Moses to go and die alone, and the students must have assumed this was something similar. It did not occur to them at that point that Elijah had been completely translated into the Spirit Realm, and didn't have to face death. Elisha gave up arguing with them and the student body sent their strongest fifty hikers, who searched three days in the area with no success. Elisha got to say to them later, "Told you so!"

As they were near the city of Jericho and night was falling, it was obvious Elisha was going to stay with them at least overnight. At the foot of the hill on which the city stood was one of several springs washing over the area. They noted to Elisha that the land was fertile, but this particular spring was brackish and the water was causing plants, animals and people to suffer a low level of poisoning. Elisha instructed them to bring a new, unused clay salt-cellar; it has to be new and dedicated for the Lord's ceremonial use. He had them fill it with salt. It was something very easy to get from the nearby Dead Sea, where drying beds had stood since prehistoric times.

In a highly symbolic act, Elisha poured the salt into the spring. He declared it healed. To this day, you can travel to Ain-es-Sultan on the West Bank, where the ancient mound of Tell Jericho stands, and it is the only spring in this whole area that is sweet and clean.

A few days later, as Elisha was returning to Bethel, a group of young louts had come out to meet him along the main road rising up through the steep wadi. They fell in behind him as he walked. Taking advantage of the ambiguity of the Hebrew language, they were taunting Elisha. On the surface, the expression "go up" means "climb the hill," but also "get out of here." But it was also mocking Elijah's departure, which they would have heard about by now, and they were telling Elisha he should catch a chariot ride to Heaven, too. Further, they called him "bald head." Most baldness was due to leprosy, so they were telling him he was wholly unwelcome.

But again, it was a pun in Hebrew, suggesting he no longer had his master around, as if he were unqualified to be the “head” of the prophets of Jehovah.

These young smart-alecks were no doubt partisans in favor of defending Jeroboam’s shrine against the noisome presence of prophets of Jehovah. It was typical Hebrewchutzpah to establish a prophet’s school in the shrine city, which already had its own paganized training center of false prophets. There’s no doubt some of these boys were students in that competing idolatrous academy.

Elisha pronounced them accursed in the name of Jehovah. As they came near a forest on the way, a pair of mother bears came out from the trees and mauled 42 of those young louts.

Elisha went up to Mount Carmel, which at this time served as a kind of retreat, where Elijah had built the altar to Jehovah and demonstrated that He was the one true God of Israel. After a time of worship and contemplation there, he returned to Samaria to continue his former master’s ministry.

2 Kings 3

When Ahab’s heir Ahaziah died, the throne passed to a younger brother, Jehoram. This one at least had the sense to remove his father’s palace idol of Baal. However, he still kept the shrines at Dan and Bethel operating. So keep in mind that the northern kingdom was still deeply pagan in orientation.

Jehoshaphat reigned in Judah to the south and was regarded as a good king, cleansing the kingdom of pagan idols and commissioning priests to travel around the land teaching the law to the people. However, he was stupid enough to ally with Ahab by marrying his son to the latter’s daughter.

At this time, Moab was a tributary to Israel, while Edom was under Judah’s thumb. Moab rebelled as soon as Ahab died, and stopped sending the annual tribute of sheep and wool. Jehoram decided to go and collect by force. He mustered his troops and sent a message to Judah, asking if his ally would like to join him in this venture. Besides, the strategy required Jehoram to march through Judah and Edom. The northern border of Moab had been highly fortified over the past few years while things had been unstable in Samaria, so he wanted to attack from the south.

Jehoshaphat’s job was to provide the reserve troops, and Edom contributed a smaller force in a similar role. We have no idea which route they took, but the idea was to avoid being seen by Moab’s lookouts and spies. They came around the south end of the sea and picked up the Edomite troops. It wasn’t far to the southern border of Moab, the Wadi Zered (Wadi al-Hasa today).

But this took them seven days, and Edom was in drought. There was no water in the wadi, and they had run out of what they carried; the nearby Dead Sea was toxic. Maintaining the fiction that Israel still worshiped Jehovah, Jehoram wailed that He had brought them out to this place to die. Yet the king had not bothered to inquire of Jehovah’s prophet, Elisha, who had quietly come along for the trip (some of that Hebrew sarcasm). So it was for Jehoshaphat to suggest asking a prophet of God, and one of Jehoram’s lieutenants casually answered that Elisha was there. He was known as a close servant of Elijah (washing his hands prior to ceremonies).

That sounded quite trustworthy to Jehoshaphat, so they went down to see Elisha in the camp.

Keep in mind that, as battle leaders, the kings would have been discussing things from some high spot overlooking the Wadi Zered, while the troops would have been waiting, probably setting up camp somewhere nearby on open terrain. We have no idea which of the two obvious routes this large force would have taken, but both the western shore of the Dead Sea, and the ancient Highway of Kings, would cross relatively flat open areas where they intersect with the Wadi Zered. However, the narrative makes it sound like they hugged the shore of the Dead Sea.

Elisha received the King of Israel with harsh words, suggesting he consult with prophets of his pagan idols. The king's response was to blame Elisha's God for the bad situation. Elisha came back that, as surely as his God was alive, not a dead idol, that he would not bother responding were it not for the presence of the faithful King Jehoshaphat of Judah. So Elisha called for a musician to play and sing some familiar worship tunes. This put him in the frame of mind to hear more clearly in his spirit what God would have to say. Keep in mind that a military camp of this sort would have been a busy, noisy place.

The Lord responded by speaking through Elisha: Dig some long catch basins in the wadi floor. They would feel no cooling wind, nor would they see or hear the storms, but somewhere far upstream it would rain and the valley would run with fresh water. It would be no sweat at all for God to supply their need, and He would deliver Moab into their hands, as well. They were ordered to take advantage of the situation and set Moab back to the Stone Age: pull down every fortified and walled city, cut down every useful tree, fill the wells with sand, and fill all the farm fields with rubble from the destroyed cities.

So the next morning, with the ritual sharing of bread with God, that water filled the wadi, coming down from the highlands up on northern Edom. By this time, Moab's spotters had notified their king that the three armies were on the southern border. This far outnumbered his troops, so he pressed into service any man large enough to wear armor. They had camped rather hastily on the border, and when they rose to face the onslaught, they saw the wet valley floor below. Having no report of rain, they mistook the red glint of the sunrise off the water as blood. Surely the three kings had quarreled and the armies had fought!

So they rushed down the slope to attack. They were met by the fully intact army of Israel in the lead, and were slaughtered. The survivors hastily withdrew and retreated back into the hills. The triple invasion force then rose and began destroying the whole countryside, as ordered.

Now, there was one city that was not easy to attack – Kir-harasheth. You'd have to see it (modern day Kerak, Jordan). The hilltop is a rounded triangle with a long tail running off to the southeast, and a skinny finger ridge sticking out on the northwestern corner. The hill is very steep-sided, with deep ravines on every side, and heights across each one facing the city. It was such a wonderful site that the Crusaders built one of their fortresses there, and archaeology has not found much of what might have stood before that. However, tradition says the Crusader castle on the southeastern end stands on the ruins of an ancient fort, with a deep cut below off the near end.

So there was no way to attack this thing except with slingers, the artillery of that day. Estimates vary, but we have reason to believe they could lob 1kg stones far enough to rain down inside the city walls, and probably begin the process of chipping away at some of the walls. They weren't made of cut stone, but stacked rocks and mud.

The King of Moab, Mesha, left a stone monument that has been found and refers to this battle. Seeing that a prolonged siege would succeed, he tried to slip out with his elite troops on one

side to where the Edomite forces were waiting. Maybe he thought they would be less interested in fighting so hard, but he guessed wrong and was driven back inside the walls.

So he did the one thing that would have worked. Keep in mind that the northern kingdom of Israel had become highly superstitious at this point, having no faith in Jehovah. Mesha sacrificed his first-born son to Chemosh, Moab's national deity, right on the wall of the city in plain sight of Israel's army. It's not at all uncommon among Moabites to do such a thing, but Israel had some weird superstitions about Abraham sacrificing his son and what kind of magical power it was supposed to have unleashed. Notice that neither Judah nor Edom reacted much to this, but it really messed with the heads of the Israeli soldiers (the Hebrew wording in our text is rather hard to translate).

So they backed off in dismay. The other two national forces had no reason to keep the siege going. While Mesha didn't have much to save, he did manage to keep his independence, as noted on that stone monument. The expedition dispersed and everyone went home.

2 Kings 5:1-19

The Kingdom of Syria at this time was mostly Aramaic people who spoke pretty much the same language as Israel. They also had some similar customs. The Syrians knew that Israel claimed to worship Jehovah, and were familiar with some of the requirements attached to that. We don't know how Syrians looked at leprosy, but they did know how Israel's law made lepers social outcasts, and that it was supposedly a command from their God, since it was regarded as a sign of divine wrath.

The main point to notice in the opening verses is that Naaman was the commander of the Syrian royal army, and that the King really favored him for his successes in battle. Whatever leprosy meant in Syrian society, it would become a serious hindrance to his duties, and signaled a slow and painful death, with portions of skin and limbs dying and rotting off.

We get the picture that, at this point, Israel was somewhat of a tributary to Syria, having lost in some battle. During the recent conflicts, the Syrian raiders had seized some border captives, and among them was an Israeli girl who ended up a handmaiden to Naaman's wife. The girl was old enough to remember stories of a prophet and his miracles. She believed. At some point she remarked that she wished Naaman could visit this famous prophet who hung around the royal court in Samaria. She wasn't hostile to her servitude; she genuinely cared about the master of the household. It's obvious she had little clue about the whole story, and was unable to provide much information.

But this remark was reported to Naaman, who then in turn asked his master the King about it. They knew less about the situation than the girl did. Still, they were currently somewhat dominant over Israel and decided to send Naaman with gifts and a substantial escort. The essence of the letter was that the King of Israel should call in this prophet to heal Naaman. Jehoram tore his clothes as a sign of being quite distraught. He might have known Elisha could do miracles, but this was a bit much. How many lepers did he have in his kingdom, and none were healed?

He was pretty sure this was some kind of game, an excuse to attack Israel. The famous general would not have tried to enter the city, knowing the rules about lepers, but he could easily spy out the situation and make tactical plans accordingly. Jehoram was already somewhat of a tributary to Syria's king; if he could have fought off an attack from Syria, he would have already

done it.

So we can picture Naaman camping outside the city with all the finery of someone high in Syrian royal service. And word now goes out through the grapevine that this is just a ruse looking to cause trouble and Jehoram has torn his clothes in mourning. Elisha got word of it and sent a message to his king. What's all the fuss? Elisha would gladly show Naaman that God had at least one true prophet in Israel.

We have no idea where Elisha resided at that time. Chances are he had quarters near the City of Samaria so he could be ready at hand to prod Jehoram now and then, representing Jehovah's interests, and keep track of the King. So when Jehoram finally replied to Naaman, he told him to visit with Elisha the prophet. Naaman duly reported to the prophet's residence in his chariot, and with escorting chariots. Again, he stayed outside the courtyard wall out of respect for the religious rules about lepers.

While Naaman was waiting to see what would happen, Elisha sent out a servant with the message that Naaman should bathe seven times in the Jordan River. This wasn't some crazy ritual bath, either, just that he should plunge himself under the surface of the water seven times. The promise is that it would restore his normal skin.

It was not at all what Naaman was expecting. He was used to the pagan prophets in Syria doing all sorts of mumbo-jumbo rituals. Here, the prophet never even showed his face. Naaman ranted about how the two rivers nearest his country's capital of Damascus were much nicer than the muddy Jordan in the first place (they were and still are). But Naaman's attendants spoke very wisely to him. If Elisha had demanded some heroic deed, would that have appealed more to Naaman? Why could the power of Elisha's God not be found with a simple act in the local river?

So Naaman decided to give it a shot. The road between Samaria and Damascus ran across the Upper Jordan River near the Wadi Yarmuk, or he could head straight down a much closer one (Wadi Farah) starting near Shechem, just a short ride from Samaria. So Naaman did this rather odd and simple act, and on the seventh dunking, came up with skin as clean as a child's.

It would be hard to imagine just how it felt to overcome what would have been an early death sentence, and a slow and degrading death at that. So he returned to Elisha's residence with his whole entourage and tried to offer some kind of payment. Elisha steadfastly refused, using a strong oath – "as surely as Jehovah lives." In this he was quite consistent with his predecessor, who was at pains to show that he could not be bribed. So Naaman decided the least he could do was convert to the worship of Jehovah, who surely was a living God, indeed, unlike all the others he had heard about.

He wasn't proposing to become a Covenant citizen. Rather, this was embracing the Covenant of Noah, with much looser requirements. It was common in the minds of people in the Ancient Near East to imagine a god as tied to some location. It's not meant to be a fact, so much as symbolism. Naaman asked permission to take with him as much Israeli soil as two mules could carry in baskets. It was his way of honoring the God of the land who had won his loyalty. He would construct a shrine that incorporated the soil. He wanted to stand on "sacred ground" when he worshiped God. He also asked Elisha to intercede with Jehovah regarding his feudal duty.

Naaman, as servant of his King, would be required to engage in some of the King's ritual worship of Rimmon. That was part of a man's feudal duty throughout the Ancient Near East

(it's why Abraham refused to accept the burial cave as a gift, because it would have feudal duties attached to it). Naaman asked that Jehovah wouldn't take it seriously when he engaged in such rituals, but forgive him and know that Naaman's heart belonged to Jehovah.

Elisha told Naaman he had no cause to worry; peace with Jehovah wasn't that tricky.

2 Kings 6:8-23

So far as we can tell, the School of Prophets established by Samuel, and restored by Elijah, were responsible for the historical records that form the books of Samuel and Kings. There are multiple stories told by different observers, stitched together by some senior editor within the school. It would appear that very little actual editing took place, as each tale is self-contained and often presents a variation in the character of the storytelling.

This short narrative sticks out as being about a particular problem: the Syrian raids into Israel. The passage uses a Hebrew word indicating predatory raiding, taking plunder of crops, animals, slaves, etc., whenever they were vulnerable. The issue was to avoid armed protection, because a raiding party was itself vulnerable, particularly after the loot was being hauled away by rather small raiding bands. They traveled light for speed of movement. The purpose of this story is to show how the raids were stopped.

Along with this raiding, King Ben-hadad got the bright idea of ambushing Jehoram, King of Israel. So he conferred with his spies and set up his ambush along various routes Jehoram was known to use. In those days, there would have been far more trees than now, providing cover along the ridge lines, and some deep canyon pockets here and there. Every time they had an ambush waiting, the spotters watched as Jehoram would slip by on another road. Elisha kept warning Jehoram of these ambushes because the Lord kept revealing them to him. This happened several times.

So Ben-hadad flew into a rage and demanded to know who was tipping off his quarry. One of his advisers warned him that Elisha was a real prophet of Jehovah who knew all of Ben-hadad's most intimate secrets. So the king turned his attention to Elisha and sent spies to find out where he was staying. For the time being, he was in Dothan. This is the site where Joseph's brothers dropped him in a well before selling him to slavers. The site today is called Tel Dothan where there have been intermittent archaeological digs. It's roughly ten miles (16km) north and a little east of Samaria.

The site of Dothan stands on a prominent hill, with a lot of flat ground to the west, a saddle with another hill to the east, and fairly wide valleys on the north and south sides. Ben-hadad sent a substantial force by night to surround the hilltop city. Early in the morning, when Elisha and his trainees were getting ready to leave, one of them saw the surrounding forces and panicked. There was no doubt whom the troops were after.

Elisha told the young man to settle down, because the forces of Jehovah outnumbered the Syrian troops. Then he prayed for his attendant to see the truth: the slopes of the hill covered with angelic forces, in their glowing chariots. So it was no big deal for Elisha and his gang to stroll down the hill into the Syrian camp where the ensign indicated the commander could be found. He prayed that God would strike the troops with a peculiar form of blindness, in that they could not recognize the terrain. Suddenly, they weren't too sure where they were.

Then Elisha told them that they had taken the wrong road, and this was not Dothan. He led them over the seemingly unfamiliar terrain for the next couple of hours until he brought them

right into the middle of Samaria, where we believe there was a very large open plaza out in front of the palace. Then Elisha prayed that the Syrian troops would get their senses back. When they realized where they were, they were surrounded by Israel's troops in a hostile environment. We can be sure they surrendered.

Jehoram asked if Elijah had brought these enemy soldiers there to be slaughtered. Elisha insisted that was a bad idea. The men were all captives now; would you attack helpless prisoners of war? No, this time the right move was to feed them and send them home with the tale of what happened to them. So Jehoram gave them a feast and released them to return. Ben-hadad stopped sending raiding parties. That didn't prevent him coming down in a full invasion later, but the raids stopped.

This is the kind of power God can exert when people trust Him, and sometimes when He's being patient waiting for someone to turn to Him.

2 Kings 9

We are going to take a look at Jehu's reign over the Northern Kingdom. First, let's note that during this period, several generations see kings of both north and south have the same names – Jehoram/Joram, Ahaziah, Joash/Jehoash. It can be confusing if you aren't keeping track of which name points to which king. In our current narrative, Ahaziah is the young King of Judah, who was a nephew of Jehoram, King of Israel.

Let me try to untangle that. We remember that Ahab married Jezebel, the princess of Tyre and Sidon. They had three children who are major figures: Ahaziah, Jehoram and their sister Athaliah. Ahaziah was the royal heir who died quickly, and his brother Jehoram succeeded him. This is the king who led the battle against Moab, and had to deal with Elisha a lot. His counterpart from Judah was Jehoshaphat, a much older man. So Jehoram marries off his sister Athaliah to the son of this Jehoshaphat – who was named Jehoram, also. This Jehoram of Judah doesn't reign long. His successor is Ahaziah, named after the uncle in Israel who died quickly. In our narrative here, Ahaziah is King of Judah for a very short time when things are turned upside down in Israel. Keep in mind that Ahaziah of Judah is a direct descendant (grandson) of Ahab.

Elisha inherited Elijah's instructions to anoint Jehu King of Israel. Jehu was at that time serving as the ranking general over Israel's army. Jehoram of Israel has taken his army to Ramoth-gilead to recover the city from the Syrians. They succeed, but Jehoram is wounded in battle, so he slips back across the Jordan River to recover at his second palace in Jezreel. Meanwhile, the army remains in Ramoth-gilead to protect the city from a Syrian counter attack.

Thus, Elisha commissions his new servant, after having lost Gehazi to greed and leprosy, to go and anoint Jehu as king (tradition says the servant is Jonah). Elisha gives the servant a small vial of fragrant oil made just for this purpose, having a seal in the top. He then tells him to proceed to Ramoth-gilead in a hurry, find Jehu, anoint him privately, and then flee as if from a threat to his life. Hint: He is anointing Jehu to slaughter a bunch of people that God has already condemned for their own murders and general destruction of *shalom*.

So the servant finds Jehu sitting among other commanders at a conference table in the courtyard of a large home. The prophet is dressed in a fashion that marks him as such, and the men at this table are half amused by the whole idea that a prophet of Jehovah comes to visit them. The young prophet trainee announces he has a message for the commander. Jehu makes a joke: "All

of us are commanders. Who do you want?" The servant of Elisha knows that Jehu would be first to speak as the senior man, so indicates he needs a private audience with him.

Jehu leads him into the house. The servant breaks open the strong smelling anointing oil and pours it on Jehu's head. Then he proceeds to tell him his mission is to slaughter the descendants of Ahab, in vengeance for his and Jezebel's murder of Jehovah's prophets and a lot of other people who were faithful to Him. So Jehu was ordered to kill every male who descended from Ahab. Finally, he was to feed Jezebel to the dogs so that she would have no tomb. Then the young prophet fled. This symbolizes that Jehu's mission must begin immediately, and that he had a lot of killing to do.

As is typical of such houses, the floor level was somewhat above that of the open courtyard. So Jehu stops and stands at the top of the steps. One of his subordinates asked what that "madman" had to say; it was nutty for him to flee like that. Jehu suggested that his staff had put some actor up to his whole wild scene. "He was your lackey. You already know what he said." They denied it, and it was clear they were puzzled enough to be genuinely curious. So Jehu recounted the anointing and commission.

Upon hearing this, all of them quickly ran to place their military outer robe down on the steps, making a carpet for Jehu. It symbolized giving their all to him as their King. Then they grabbed shofars and blew them, shouting that Jehu was King of Israel. There's a side note that Jehoram wasn't in town with them, but off in Jezreel healing from his battle wounds, sustained in fighting to gain control of Ramoth-gilead. So Jehu said that if they were serious about this, they needed to bring all the guards and random folks near the city walls inside and lock the gates. He didn't need anyone running off to Jezreel to report this rebellion.

So a short time later Jehu is in his chariot, driving his own horses. Keep in mind that in the Old Testament, people seldom rode horseback. They always rode behind them in chariots, and they were invariably two-man chariots for the military. One drove the horses and the other typically fought in battle. Jehu ditched his driver to ride light. Of course, he wasn't alone, as almost any man of importance always had at least one servant. In this case, Jehu had his own military bodyguard with him.

It would have been the better part of a day to ride some 35+ miles (56km) to Jezreel. It's a good bet this next scene is late in the day. A watchman sees this handful of chariots approaching from the direction of Ramoth-gilead and notifies the still living King Jehoram. The king responds with orders to send out a messenger, who would have been riding in a smaller, much lighter chariot, probably with only one horse. Jehoram has no idea what's afoot, only that his commanding general is rushing up toward the palace from the battle front. So he sends a messenger to ask if it's good news – "Is it peace?" He can wait for the full report, but wants to know if he needs to prepare to flee some Syrian invasion or something.

When the messenger gets to the hard-driving Jehu and asks his question, Jehu tells him peace is the least of his worries, and to fall in behind the column of chariots. This happens again with another messenger. So Jehoram assumes the worst and decides to meet Jehu on the road. He orders his chariot readied, and is joined by the recently crowned Ahaziah of Judah, his nephew, who had come for a family visit. The two kings in their chariots meet Jehu on the road still outside the city walls.

In person, this time, Jehoram asked Jehu if things were okay. Jehu says abruptly that things are not okay so long as Jezebel's sins were not avenged. Jehoram now realizes what this is all about,

and just barely manages to turn his chariot around, calling out to Ahaziah to flee. Keep in mind that Jehoram knows that this is the wrath of God, and that it will fall on all the male descendants of Ahab. That would include his nephew.

Jehu whips up a bow and arrow and shoots Jehoram in the back, so that the arrow comes out of his heart in front. He drops down dead onto the floor of his chariot, but Ahaziah gets away. Jehu tells his second in command, Bidkar, to throw Jehoram's body into the former vineyard of Naboth, which would have been just off the road on the hillside below the city walls. Jehu memorializes Naboth, and we learn after the fact that apparently his sons were killed with him to ensure no one could ever claim his land back. At this point, Jehu faithfully represents the justice of Jehovah.

Meanwhile, Ahaziah had managed to put the garden house, which Ahab had built on Naboth's land, between him and Jehu's next arrow. Doing so also meant he was forced to take the long way around the city. Jehu ordered his men to give chase, taking a shortcut. He estimated that when Ahaziah's chariot reached the road ascending a low ridge near Ibleam, he would be vulnerable to a good arrow ambush. The main road back home passed over this nearly flat ridge near the city of Ibleam, just a few miles south and little west from Jezreel. Evidently they caught him there and Ahaziah turned his chariot back west, but didn't escape. He ended up a few miles away in Megiddo, where he died. His staff fetched his body and took him back to Jerusalem for burial.

The narrative notes that Ahaziah of Judah had just started his reign less than a year ago.

So while that scene was playing out, Jehu came riding up into the city of Jezreel and headed toward the palace. Jezebel had heard about the fracas outside of the city, probably from the watchmen on the tower and walls. She was all dolled up, choosing to die like the royalty she was, and the kind of royalty, one who acted like a prostitute for her deities (proper Hebrew ladies would never wear that stuff). She made a snide comment about how things didn't turn out too well for Zimri, who murdered his king and was in turn murdered shortly thereafter. She was equating Jehu's bloody start with the folly of Zimri. The difference was that Jehu had a commission from Jehovah, a deity she despised.

Jehu pulled up under the window where she sat, and shouted up to the other open windows: "Who is with me?" The question had obvious connotations: Who wants to live after I take over? A handful of harem servants stuck their heads out the windows and signaled their capitulation. He ordered them to throw Jezebel out from her seat to the ground. She splattered some of her blood on the palace walls and on Jehu's horses. He then rode his horses and chariot over her.

Jehu entered the palace and ate his first meal as king in the palace. During this time he would start giving orders, asserting his authority as the new King. Oops! He forgot that Jezebel was royalty, and so he ordered that her body be treated accordingly. All they found were her head, hands and feet. If someone were anointed for priestly service, the oil would be put on those parts. Her pretense as high priestess meant that it was all the dogs left of her (typical Hebrew symbolism). When they came back and told him what they found, he noted wryly that this was according to the curse God laid on her. No one would ever be able to point to her grave.

Jehu isn't finished yet.

2 Kings 10

We learn quickly that Jehu is not a good guy. He uses the Word of Jehovah as a cover for his

bloodthirsty ways. He is very sly and political, but not very religious at all.

Ahab had as yet seventy surviving descendants in and around Samaria and Jezreel. Jehu sent a letter to the ruling nobles in the kingdom, specifically to those tasked with maintaining the royal family. It was common in those days for royalty to apprentice their excess sons to other officials, in part to keep them from developing an appetite for competing with the chosen heirs.

Jehu's letter warned them that, since they had Ahab's surviving heirs, and that they all possessed the means for warfare, they should decide who would succeed Jehoram. Then they should prepare to defend that choice with whatever forces they had against those that Jehu could muster against them. But with two kings dead, their only counsel was to surrender before they were all killed. So they sent letters back capitulating completely.

So Jehu sent a second letter instructing them to execute all of Ahab's descendants and to bring the heads to him at Jezreel. When Jehu got word the deed was done, he instructed that the heads should be piled on either side of the city gate. The next morning he called an assembly of representative elders of the kingdom. The essence of this meeting was for them to swear fealty to him as King.

He opened with the comment that they were capable of judging – "You are righteous (enough to know what's good)." He noted that he had led a revolt against his master. Indicating the heads of Ahab's family, he asked a rhetorical question: Who killed these? The whole point is that he's trying to avoid portraying himself as the bloodthirsty tyrant he was. Rather, he was faithful to the word of Jehovah through Elijah the prophet.

This gave him the political cover to continue the slaughter, taking out everyone who still supported Ahab's dynasty. That was going to be a lot of dead bodies.

Then he headed off to Samaria to finish all the administrative work of asserting his rule over the capital city itself. On the way, he ran across the royal family of Jehoram's sister, Athaliah, coming from Judah to visit their relatives in Jezreel. They had no idea at this point what had happened. The text uses the abbreviated term "Ahaziah's brothers," referring to the recently dispatched King of Judah. We don't currently know where this shearing house was, except that it was somewhere between Ibleam and Samaria. So Jehu ordered his troops to seize them alive, then he had them executed in ritual fashion, buried in a pit and covered with rocks. This was a common way of marking the grave of criminals. Thus, all of Ahab's descendants from Judah were gone, too, obeying God's command.

Between there and Samaria, he met someone important on the way. It was Jehonadab, the chief elder of the Rechabites. These were folks who remained faithful to the old nomad ways, living in tents, herding sheep and goats, and avoiding anything tied with sedentary living, which included not drinking wine. This was a commitment to purity, and it made them a very famous community in Israel, known for their zeal for Jehovah.

Jehu asked Jehonadab to publicly support him, and the elder agreed. He rode in Jehu's chariot to symbolize it. Notice how Jehu invests a lot of effort in appearances, but not much in actual moral good. He's got Jehonadab fooled. With this support, he entered Samaria and wiped out all of the remaining supporters of Ahab's dynasty in the city.

Now it's time for one last trick. He stood in the company of those who continued to support Jezebel's program of converting Israel to worshipping Baal (and by implication, Ashtarte). Jehu put on like he was going to really outdo Ahab and Jezebel, and ordered up a celebration. He demanded that everyone devoted to Baal show up. The Temple to Baal was packed. Then he

issued a command that all the faithful worshipers of Baal be given sacred robes for this big ceremony. This, of course, would mark them visibly.

Standing near the entrance with Jehonadab as his witness, he ordered that any worshiper of Jehovah who slipped in would be tossed out. Meanwhile, Jehu came out and secretly told his eighty-man armed escort to not let anyone in a robe leave alive. Then the devotees went inside the sanctuary and began their ceremony. As soon as the high priest finished with the offerings, Jehu ordered his men to attack those in the temple.

After the bodies were dragged out, so were all the idols and furnishings. All of it was burned. The whole place was knocked down, leaving only one or two rows of wall stones. It was designated as a sewer; that is, it became the place where chamber pots were dumped in the city. They had a well, but no running water and no sewer system as we would think of it. With folks dumping their sewage there, it could never be used as a shrine again. Everything Jezebel built was gone.

However, Jehu was political, not truly faithful to Jehovah. He kept the shrines of Jeroboam active for the same reason they were built: Jehu wanted to ensure his people didn't allow worshiping in Jerusalem to become a wedge for pulling them back under the Kings of Judah. He kept up the pretense of worshiping Jehovah as the deity who rode the golden calves.

But since Jehu did faithfully execute the will of Jehovah against the family of Ahab, the Lord promised that Jehu's dynasty would last at least to the fourth generation. Meanwhile, the Syrian usurper Hazael began raiding all the regions of Israel that he could reach. After twenty-eight years on the throne, Jehu was succeeded by his son, Jehoahaz.

2 Kings 11

Let's remind ourselves that Athaliah was the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel; she married Jehoram of Judah. During his reign, he gave his wife way too much authority, allowing her to weaken the Temple services to Jehovah. Eventually she had a shrine to Baal built on the Temple plaza (but apparently not inside the Temple grounds itself). While standard annual feasts of the Covenant were kept, a great many priests and Levites were pushed out of active service, and Temple offerings declined dramatically.

All of this sin led to God punishing Jehoram, allowing Edom to break the yoke, and some foreign invasion forces to plunder the palace. They also took as hostages all but the youngest son, Ahaziah. Then Jehoram died of a horrifying ailment that saw his intestines extrude out of his body, so it was an agonizing death. Ahaziah was king a very short time and was killed when Jehu rebelled against the King of Israel to the north. Then Jehu slaughtered all the adult men from the royal family of Judah as they traveled to visit their kinfolk at the Jezreel palace.

When Athaliah learned of all this, she finished off the other royal children too young to travel on such a visit. Of course, this was actually at the hands of her royal bodyguard, who by tradition were essentially Philistines loyal to David's royal household, who would have had no interest in the politics of the kingdom. It's unlikely she would see the need to witness their grisly task. One of her grandsons escaped this slaughter. Her son Ahaziah had a sister; we believe she was a half-sister born from one of Jehoram's concubines – Jehosheba. She was married to the High Priest, Jehoiada.

It's easy to see how Jehosheba would be a partisan in favor of the true worship of Jehovah, and not at all pleased with Athaliah's plans to convert Judah to the worship of Baal, as her mother

Jezebel tried to do in Israel. So Jehosheba grabbed the infant son of Ahaziah, a child named Joash (AKA Jehoash). The lady hid him from the slaughtering soldiers in one of the bedrooms with his wet nurse. Later, she smuggled him out of the palace alive and took him to the Temple. Her husband as High Priest managed to hide the boy in the Temple grounds and raise him to serve Jehovah.

At this time, we are pretty sure the wider Temple plaza was at least a full story higher in elevation than the palace. The Temple courts would have been yet another level higher than most of the plaza. Solomon put walls of varying heights around the different courts – Court of Gentiles, Court of Women, Court of Israel. However, all of them were taller than humans. With no interest in the Temple services, Athaliah would have relied on spies to keep a watch over things in the Temple. Apparently they weren't very effective. She knew nothing about Joash.

So after six or so years of Athaliah forcing Baal worship down everyone's throat in Judah, it was time for the High Priest to act. Jehoiada commissioned the head of the Temple Guard (they were all Levites trained as professional soldiers) to recall the entire adult male population of the Tribe of Levites, especially the entire Temple Guard force who were home on off-season rotation. They assembled in a secret meeting at the Temple, and the High Priest introduced them to Joash. They took an oath on their commitment to Jehovah to carry out his plans to raise up Joash as the King of Judah.

Side note: The Temple Guards, for most of the nation's history, bore a sort of police authority to enforce ritual law. They would have by this time become a very strong independent military force, easily matching the full-time professional army of Judah. And at this point in the story, they were all armed and assembled in the city.

We don't really know the exact layout of the Temple Plaza and palace, but here's what we believe the text is telling us. The normal rotation of guards for the Sabbath duty were divided into three groups. One group guarded the palace doorway closest to the Temple. A second group guarded the matching south entrance to the Temple grounds. The third group was at another gate nearby. These would defend the Temple grounds from anyone who might interfere with the coronation ritual.

The rest who would normally be off rotation would be stationed in a tight arc just in front of the steps leading up from the Court of Israel to the raised porch and Temple entrance. No one was to be allowed past them once Jehoiada set things in motion. They would remain as the young King's bodyguard until further notice. Then the High Priest passed out to them the heavier lances and shields David had placed in care of the Temple. This would make them a very formidable force, more than a match for anything Athaliah could muster immediately. Normal guard duty required only a short sword and leather armor, and this was all the royal bodyguard would have had.

At the appropriate moment, Jehoiada brought out the boy Joash and stood him by one of the two huge bronze pillars standing at the front of the Temple. One was designated for the vesting of High Priests, the other for the Kings. Joash stood by the latter pillar and was crowned, then handed a copy of the Covenant. He was anointed King and Jehoiada led a chant and cheer for him, proclaiming him the rightful King of Judah.

The crowd was made up of those still faithful to the Covenant, so naturally they cheered quite loudly, celebrating the end of Athaliah's immoral oppression. She hated the worship of Jehovah and was probably sitting in the throne room when she heard the loud cheering in the Temple.

With her bodyguard in tow, she ran to the Temple gate and saw what was happening. She knew exactly what it meant, and cried "Treason!" It was supposed to be a signal for her bodyguard to attack, but they were far outnumbered and out-gunned, so to speak.

So when Jehoiada commanded his forces near the gate to take her in custody, you can bet the royal bodyguard surrendered or were taken with her. The High Priest wanted to ensure she didn't bleed on the Temple grounds and defile things, so he had her marched to the Horse Gate, somewhere along the eastern wall of the city, between the palace and the old fortress of David. They struck her down there, along with anyone who was loyal to her.

While that bunch were marching off, Jehoiada led another ceremony, renewing the Covenant with the King, himself and the tribal elders on hand. He stressed the various obligations of each party before Jehovah. Once it was clear what he meant, the elders led the crowd to the shrine of Baal there on the Temple plaza. They tore it all down, destroyed the images and furnishings, and killed the pagan priest there.

Meanwhile, Jehoiada reasserted the Temple services to their former grandeur. All the priests and Levites who had been run out of town were enrolled once more in a fully attended rotation. Everyone fit to serve was appointed a duty in the Temple during some part of the year. This included a much higher count of Temple guards to serve as the King's bodyguard until things could get back to normal.

So they escorted the boy king down to the palace and went through the ritual of placing him on the throne. You can be sure they would have immediately reorganized the palace staff and begun getting rid of anyone who didn't swear formal allegiance to the King.

2 Kings 17

What we pass over from the previous lesson is a long list of kings both north and south whose reigns were unremarkable in terms of what it tells us about the Covenant. However, the Fall of Samaria is quite significant.

Hoshea was the last King of Israel. Already there has been mass slaughter at the hand of Syria in both the north and south. One of the kings of Judah made the mistake of seeking Assyria's protection from Syria, thus bringing Israel and Judah to Assyria's attention. While the Assyrian emperor did as asked and took Syria down, it eventually left all three kingdoms as tributaries of Assyria.

During one of the frequent Assyrian raids into this region, Shalmaneser humbled Hoshea and demanded annual tribute. This was about 732 BC. The Lord allowed this because, while Hoshea was better than his predecessors, he still transgressed the Covenant. And at this point, such transgression had been going on for so long that Jehovah had had enough.

Sometime around his sixth year on the throne, King Hoshea sent the tribute to Egypt, instead, trying to cultivate the protection of Pharaoh So (currently unidentified to us today). Naturally, Shalmaneser came with his troops to demonstrate his displeasure at not receiving the annual tribute. The Pharaoh of Egypt was hardly ready to back up his promises, and left Israel to its fate. The Assyrian troops laid siege to Samaria. The siege lasted three years before the walls were breached and the people were taken captive. We peg this at 722 BC.

Israel had already suffered significant population losses. The folks in the city were exiled, carried off to an area near the Khabur River, northeast of Nineveh. However, Assyria left a

skeleton crew of peasants and low ranking nobles to keep some of the agriculture alive until the new occupants of the land could be moved in. This took several decades.

There are two primary moral failures cited as the cause of Israel's demise. First is that they were ungrateful to the Master who delivered them from slavery and gave them their new identity as His own family. They completely forgot what the Passover meant. The second general mistake was to restore to the land all the degrading practices of those pagan nations they replaced. What was the point of cleansing the land during the Conquest?

No part of the kingdom escaped this corruption. This was the moral equivalent of cuckolding God. Over and over again, He sent prophets to warn them. They ignored a God who could speak to them and perform miracles, preferring the licentious behavior associated with chasing deities that didn't exist.

But Judah was also dinged in this passage. They had come very close to being completely taken over by the sins of Ahab and Jezebel through intermarriage.

At no time did Israel repent of Jeroboam's shrines. The northern kingdom completely lost track of the Covenant. Since none of the priests and Levites would serve in these shrines, Jeroboam had raised up his own loyal priesthood. It became necessary to edit the Books of Moses to ensure they matched the reality of things in the two shrines, changing the story so that the two shrines were God's chosen places of worship instead of Zion. It condemned the southern kingdom for promoting lies. This new corpus of corrupted writings became their scripture.

When Esarhaddon took the throne as Emperor of Assyria, he brought in a bunch of exiles from some other place he conquered. There were still just a few surviving crop growers in the land, but the cities were empty and occupied by wild animals. So the imported people complained to Assyria that the local gods must be really angry, having missed their offerings for such a long time. They appealed for priests of the local gods. For Assyria, that meant the corrupted priests serving those two shrines built by Jeroboam.

A batch of these charlatans were sent back and reorganized the shrine services. This gave rise to a new organized ritual now referred to as Samaritan religion. The people were mostly foreigners, with just about 5% left from the original inhabitants of Israel. It became the Kingdom of Samaria.

Meanwhile, all the people continued their own pagan traditions, since the corrupted Samaritan scriptures did not condemn pagan idolatry the way the Books of Moses do.

2 Kings 19

This is one of the pinnacles of the Covenant, a major event that marks the extent of what God will do for those who rely on Him. In the previous chapter we get a review of the Fall of Samaria in 722 BC. In 701 BC, the Assyrians came back for Judah. At this point, Judah's allies failed to send troops. Hezekiah tried to buy the Assyrians off, but it didn't work too well. It was too burdensome. Hezekiah may have tried to cultivate alliances with Egypt and Ethiopia (the latter ruled Egypt at this time), but during this time it was the Philistines who had appealed to Egypt for protection against Assyria.

In about 688 BC, Assyria came back and began to take down all the fortified cities of Judah. In the latter stages of this campaign, during the siege of Lachish, a Judean citadel toward the southwest of Jerusalem on the main route toward Egypt, the Assyrian commander Sennacherib

sent an envoy with troops to stand outside the main gate of Jerusalem and call out in the local Hebrew language to frighten the people. The city was already on high alert and mostly closed up. This act of psychological warfare was carried out by men named by their titles: the senior Commanding General (Tartan), the Chief of Palace Eunuchs (Rabsaris), and the Chief Cupbearer (Rabshakeh).

Part of the game was that these three sought direct contact with Hezekiah. This was actually something of an insult, since Hezekiah technically outranked them. So he sent an equivalent trio out to face them over the wall: Eliakim the Chamberlain, Shebna the Royal Scribe, and some senior priests. In essence, these three Assyrians warned that the Judean troops should surrender now before it's too late. When the actual siege of Jerusalem begins, it will be too late. They mocked the idea of trusting Jehovah.

Hezekiah led the people's response by tearing his clothes, a sign of distress over the blasphemy of the Assyrian officials. No one had responded to the Assyrian officials from the wall, because it was up to Jehovah to reply to this insult. Then Hezekiah donned the garb of mourning and went for extended prayer at the Temple (he was allowed up the steps as far as the main door). Meanwhile, he dispatched the officials who had participated in the parley to Isaiah to seek a word from the Lord. Having been so ardent for the Covenant, Hezekiah had good standing before Jehovah, so the Lord responded via a message from Isaiah that Sennacherib would not survive much longer. Events back in the imperial capital would distract him and he would be assassinated there.

Meanwhile, the Assyrians had troops stationed outside the city. Not enough to attack, but enough to force the city to keep the gates closed in a passive siege. The Rabshakeh was left in charge of this force when an Assyrian messenger came with orders to bring these troops down to Libnah. This is where it gets tricky for us, because we don't have a strong record of the precise order of events, and we aren't exactly sure where Libnah was.

After Sennacherib began the siege of Lachish, Egypt had marched. Pharaoh Taharqa, prior to ascending to the throne, was commander of the Egyptian forces as they marched toward the Assyrian army. While we don't exactly know the site of this important city, it's likely farther down toward the southern border of Judah, still along the main highway toward Egypt.

Lachish was closer to Jerusalem and quite large. We believe Libnah was rather small. It was likely the last citadel Sennacherib would face before turning back to Jerusalem. We believe that an advance party of Assyrian troops headed down to Libnah to begin surveying the situation and preparing for the main force to arrive. It was the arrival of this small advance party that drew Egypt's attention, and provoked their march.

Egypt took a position protecting Libnah and chased away Sennacherib's advance party. This alerted him and he suspended the attack on Lachish. He left a token force and move the main body of his troops down to face Egypt at Libnah. This was why he recalled the Rabshakeh and the troops with him at Jerusalem.

Again, Sennacherib sent a written letter to Hezekiah, warning him not to put much confidence in the Egyptian army. Take note that Sennacherib rightly attributes this problem to Jehovah, and he doubles down on the blasphemy, saying that Israel's God is a deceiver. He lists a bunch of cities and nations he managed to conquer in recent campaigns, likely referring to actions taken by other branches of the Assyrian army during his time in Judah. It would be quite unusual to bring the whole imperial army down to Judah when there was so much to do elsewhere, and

the Assyrian army at this point was staggeringly large. This portion of the army in Judah was merely their expeditionary force.

Again, Hezekiah takes the matter before the Lord. He spreads this letter in the Presence of the Lord at the Temple door. His confession is a model of humility, glorifying Jehovah as the one and only true God. There was no doubt what Assyria could do, but only if God allowed it.

Isaiah's message to Hezekiah this time focuses on the real issue: Sennacherib's blasphemy before God's own people. The message references the crossing of the Reed Sea during the Exodus, as if Sennacherib hadn't bothered to study history. The Assyrians were just a tool in God's hand, and there was nothing he did that God didn't see or constrain for His own purposes. So God mocks the Assyrian habit of putting a ring in the nose of every conquered king, to be dragged along with a hook. This time instead, Sennacherib would be dragged by the nose back home in defeat.

The second part of the message is to Hezekiah. The presence of Assyrian troops prevented planting crops that year. Just like in a sabbatical year, the Lord would cause volunteer crops to grow two years in succession. And this symbolized that the Judean population ("the remnant") would recover from the war losses. Finally, Sennacherib's troops would never get a chance to actually besiege Jerusalem.

There's a bit of confusion here for a lot of people. The troops were no longer outside the City of Jerusalem. The Assyrian troops had left Jerusalem already, and rejoined the forces near the city of Libnah. They arrived and set up camp to prepare for battle in the morning. It was the battle camp outside that city where the Assyrian troops suffered a plague overnight that wiped out a significant part of the force. With such high losses, Sennacherib could not face the Egyptians. He withdrew from the land and returned to Nineveh. In a palace intrigue, two of his younger sons assassinated him in the Temple of Nisrok, and the heir Esarhaddon took the throne of Assyria.

The mightiest army in history up to that point suffered such losses during the night that it was forced to withdraw. While Judah did suffer losses of both people and the infrastructure of several major fortified cities, they recovered because it was a matter of God's glory.

2 Kings 22

Hezekiah went on to be healed of a fatal infection and granted an extra 15 years of life. But he was foolish enough to show the Babylonian envoy all the treasures he had gathered after God drove away the Assyrian army. At that time, Babylon was just a restive kingdom under the Assyrian Empire. They had plans to throw off the yoke of Assyria, and eventually did so, but our narrative was some time before that.

When King Hezekiah finally passed on, his heir was Manasseh. We remember him as easily the worst of the Kings of Judah. Not only did he reign long – 55 years – but he drove hard against the Covenant in every way possible. The previous chapter says his perversion was even worse than the Canaanites. It included setting up pagan altars in the Temple courts, offering one of his sons in the fire of Molech, and apparently doing everything possible to silence the proper worship of Jehovah. From the context of this chapter, we discover that he had destroyed all the copies of the Pentateuch that he could find. God said that He would do to Judah what He had done to the Northern Kingdom.

Manasseh's own heir, just as evil as his father, lasted two years before he was murdered in a plot by his own servants. The nobles stopped the insurrection and executed the participants of

the coup. Then his heir was placed on the throne: Josiah. His long reign ran from 640-608 BC. As much as Manasseh represented an abrupt turn from Jehovah, so much was Josiah a restoration. He was faithful and true to the God of his nation. Our text says he was eight when he took the throne, and began seeking to restore the primacy of Jehovah worship. He had all the pagan shrines removed. At age 18 (around 621 BC), he felt led to refurbish the Temple.

The Assyrian Empire was under pressure from the warring tribes to the north of their capital. This had given Josiah breathing room. He called for the silver offerings in the Temple to be used for this project of restoring the facility. The work was supervised by Shaphan, the Royal Scribe along with the High Priest, Hilkiah.

It was common throughout the Ancient Near East to hide copies of important documents in the foundations of buildings as a sort of time capsule. When the work on the Temple began, the hollow cavity in the foundation was uncovered. Inside was a copy of the Pentateuch. The High Priest found it, read it, and turned it over to Shaphan. The Scribe in turn looked it over and took it to the King. Saving the most important business for last, Shaphan reported on the work, then presented the Book of the Covenant. He read it to the King, which would have taken a significant amount of time.

At some point, Josiah was stricken with conviction over the warnings. He knew what his grandfather and father had done, but had only some oral legacy of teaching to work from. Now that he had a copy of Moses, it was a shocking revelation of God's wrath coming down on the kingdom. So he tore his clothes and lamented at the offense his nation had given to Jehovah.

He sent the book to have it examined by a reliable prophet. In this case, it was Huldah, a prophetess. She happened to reside in the more recent section of Jerusalem, constructed outside the original walls. She inquired of the Lord for an answer.

The answer was that Josiah's fears were well placed. The Lord would indeed send all the calamity on Judah that He had warned about in the Law. However, because King Josiah was tender-hearted toward Jehovah, this punishment was delayed a bit so that he would die in peace before seeing any of it.

2 Kings 23:1-30

Upon hearing from his servants on their errand to the prophetess Huldah that the Book of the Law was genuine, and the promises and warnings God made, Josiah immediately set about conforming his kingdom to the written word.

He called a meeting at the Temple, insisting that everyone possible attend. There he had the Book of Law read for their hearing. Then, according to the custom, he stood by the main pillar designated for kings and renewed his royal oath to the Covenant. Following his cue, the crowd echoed his commitment in a renewal of the Covenant.

Then he ordered the High Priest to cleanse the Temple of idols and all the furnishings dedicated to them. This stuff was burned outside the city, in a flat area of the Kidron Valley, most likely somewhere to the south. The ashes were carried off to Bethel to defile the pagan shrine there. Keep in mind that the imported pagans Esarhaddon had brought in to replace the northern kingdom had restored the services Jeroboam had established there. These imported folks were in no position to resist much of anything Josiah wanted to do, as the Assyrian imperial government was pretty busy defending itself from insurrections back in Mesopotamia.

Josiah then deposed all the priests that had been dedicated to idolatrous services. He took down the Asherah (wooden posts carved as images of female fertility deities) and burned them in the Kidron Valley; it would have made a significant bonfire. Throwing the ashes on the graves of the common folk was a symbolic act of contempt for the idols. It didn't defile the graves, but it defiled the reputation and worship of the goddesses.

Does it make you shiver to realize that during the long reign of Manasseh, homosexual male prostitutes were serving in idolatrous sacred shrines next door to the Temple? All the various incense shrines and high places were destroyed across the whole kingdom. Any members of the priestly clan that got entangled in that were retired on their priestly rations, no longer permitted to enter the Temple grounds.

The ancient shrine to Moloch was in the bottom of the Hinnom Valley, just off the southern tip of the ridge on which Zion stood. It had been resurrected and put back into service, and Josiah made it a point to defile the site in accordance with the mythology of the idol. We aren't sure what the ritual was, but it was different from the other shrines. That this eventually turned into the garbage pit for Jerusalem should indicate something.

The text mentions the two horses dedicated to the solar deity. They had been tethered at the entrance to the Temple, fed a special privileged diet, and on ceremonial occasions would pull symbolic chariots dedicated to the sun. People would bring them treats as offerings to the pagan god. The caretaker for them was a eunuch who had a booth in the Temple itself; under Moses eunuchs weren't allowed in the Temple area except in the Court of Gentiles.

King Ahaz had built himself a shrine in the upper breeze room of the palace. There had been similar shrines in the Temple courts. Josiah had all that stuff brought down and the stone or clay altars were shattered until they were sand, then dumped in the Kidron Valley. The reference to the Mount of Corruption hails back to 1 Kings 11:7, where Solomon had built for some of his wives shrines on the Mount of Olives to the despicable worship of Chemosh, Milcom and Asherahs. Throwing bones in the sites of the shrines meant it would take some serious labor to have them cleansed and restored to the service of the idols. Keep in mind that the sites were chosen based on a number of factors, and once chosen, no alternates could be selected in the same area.

He did the same thing for the shrine at Bethel. Making liberal use of the bones from graves in the area, when they spotted the graves of faithful prophets, they honored them by leaving them alone. Josiah carried this reform to Samaria and cleaned that place out, as well. Then he carried this out as far into the old northern kingdom as he dared, hunting down every pagan shrine he could identify.

We assume he returned home from this long campaign in time for the Passover, because he ordered the observation of the feast. For the first time in decades, they celebrated the Passover with such fervor and propriety that it stood out in the judgment of the prophets writing the narrative. And Josiah kept up his purge of idolatry into the very homes of the citizens. It would be hard to compare any previous or later King of Judah with Josiah's ardor for Jehovah and the Covenant.

Still, it was too late for Judah. The punishment ordained in the Covenant itself was going to fall sooner or later. Josiah met an early end in something orchestrated by God, as a matter of timing.

The Assyrian capital was under attack. Babylon had finally risen up and laid siege to Nineveh. Pharaoh Necco was marching up the coast of Palestine to support the Assyrians. Josiah led his

army out in battle against this march, being a sort of ally with Babylon (due to their feigned friendship with King Hezekiah). While Josiah did some serious damage to the Egyptian forces, he lost and was killed in battle.

This did two things. First, it put Judah under Pharaoh's authority for a while. It also kept the Egyptian army from being of much help to Assyria. Thus, Babylon won the war and established their own empire. Second, they then came looking for what was left of Judah to assert their authority, on the way to reprisal on Egypt.

Ezra 1

So we left off with the King of Judah being subject to Pharaoh. Josiah's heir took the throne in 609 BC and lasted three months as an evil king before Pharaoh deported him to Egypt. Instead, a younger brother was placed on the throne. Four years later (605 BC) Pharaoh surrendered to Babylon in the Battle of Carchemish, on the upper Euphrates. Assyria finally ceased to exist and Egypt was forced to return home and stay within her own natural borders.

This made Josiah's second son a tributary of Babylon. This was during Jeremiah's ministry. After three years he revolted and Babylon sent troops. At this point, Nebuchadnezzar carried him away captive, and also plundered the Temple. The king's son was placed on the throne, but three months later was deposed again. During this second event, all the nobles and skilled craftsmen in Jerusalem were taken into exile in Babylon. To hold the throne of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar installed the king's uncle, whom he christened Zedekiah. This one also rebelled against Babylon.

And this is where the horrific siege of Jerusalem takes place, lasting a year and a half. Zedekiah and his entourage attempted to escape one night and were pursued south along the Kidron and captured. Meanwhile, the city was utterly destroyed (586 BC). At this point the population of Judah has been ravaged by raids, because Babylon had brought in as subject armies the Syrians, Ammonites and others who gleefully raided the countryside for provisions to support the siege. Everyone in any city who survived all of this was carried away to Babylon. Only the smaller villages were left to rebuild under the appointed governor Gedaliah. All he had was the poorest of the remaining population, whom he encouraged to move into the areas near the ruins of Jerusalem to serve quietly under Babylon.

Gedaliah was murdered by the petty nobles left in the land, and that bunch then fled to Egypt. We should not be surprised that neighboring nations migrated in and settled the ruined kingdom, but obeying the rule of Babylon, they left Jerusalem vacant. Their own fortunes waxed and waned, with political alliances coming and going, but always under the watchful eye of Babylon.

During the wars of Babylon's conquest, she had allies from farther east who supported her, among them the Medes and Persians. We read in the Book of Daniel how these in due time rose up against Babylon and took over the empire. This brings us to our text in Ezra. Keep in mind that the Medo-Persian Empire was rather unusual, with a complex treaty. At first, they traded the imperial throne back and forth, while each maintained their own kings under the emperor. On top of that, there are confusing titles we cannot understand, so that persons of significance appearing in Scripture don't show up in the existing records of that period. The chronology of events is tough to follow at times, with Ezra and Nehemiah rotating in and out of service in Jerusalem.

Ezra takes up where 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles leave off. Cyrus's policy was based on the Zoroastrian religion of his people, the organizing principle that allowed them to rise and conquer such a great empire. Near as we can tell, Cyrus regarded the deities of the nations Babylon had conquered as real gods, and that they were all associates of his god. It was in his empire's interest to allow the nations to restore the shrines of their gods so that they could bless the Emperor and his empire. Thus, Judah was ordered to send back sufficient people and temple personnel to play their part in this grand vision. We have the Cylinder of Cyrus indicating this was his policy.

Thus, the Edict of Cyrus in 539 BC. As promised by Jeremiah, this was roughly 70 years after the initial conquest by Babylon. Keep in mind that this proclamation is limited to rebuilding only the Temple and so much housing and supporting structures as is necessary to restore a valid Temple service of worship. The city walls are not included in this.

Cyrus released from the imperial treasury the vessels and whatever was left from the plundering of Solomon's Temple. The Ark of Covenant is long gone, but plenty of smaller furnishings were available. Also, a hefty donation was included. Thus, the people of Judah were mobilized, and their own priests and nobles pitched in a large offering of priestly robes, musical instruments, and other forms of material support.

It should be clear right away that not many were willing to leave behind the property and wealth they had amassed while in exile. Also, the synagogue system was now well established in Babylon. The leadership regarded themselves as holy priestly blue-bloods of the Covenant religion, and refused to go back. If you glance at the next chapter of Ezra, you will likely have trouble counting, but far more priests returned than Levites, and this becomes an issue later. The number of bodies heading out in the first wave, under the protection of armed Medo-Persian escort, numbered about 50,000.

Ezra 3

The Edict of Cyrus is dated most commonly 538 BC. It probably took a couple of years for the first group of 50,000 returnees to get everything organized. Then the journey would have taken no less than four months to travel some 900 miles or so. They would have followed the Euphrates north to Syria, then cross and make their way back down to southern Palestine. It took some time to assess the housing and farmland needs for this large group. This makes the start of Chapter 3 about 25 September 536 BC.

Once everyone had a place to live, the first order of business was building an altar to restore the daily sacrifices and burnt offerings to the Lord. This was just in time for the Feast of Trumpets (agricultural new year), followed soon by the Day of Atonement and then Tabernacles. The primary figures are Jeshua (Joshua) the High Priest, Zerubbabel the grandson of King Jehoiachin, while the appointed governor was Sheshbazzar.

A significant factor in their choice to build the altar first was the hostile environment of the local nations who had migrated into the land during Judah's absence. The returnees had spread out to occupy the livable cities near Jerusalem. The point in that was to reclaim the agricultural land so they could feed themselves. This came with an imperial edict, so the squatters were none too happy with the eviction notice. The returnees needed Jehovah's protection.

Cyrus had granted cypress trees from the Lebanese forest. These were cut, dragged down to the sea, and sailed in large rafts to Joppa. From there, they were dragged along the best roads to

Jerusalem. All the other materials were assembled from local quarries, etc.

After Pentecost in the following spring (May-June), the foundation of the Temple was laid. The 341 Levites who made the long journey back were charged with overseeing the Temple construction. It was obviously smaller than the original; they simply didn't have the resources to replicate Solomon's massive project. Once the foundation was completed, they celebrated by singing Psalm 136 antiphonally. Those too young to have seen the first Temple shouted with joy, while those who remembered the grandeur of Solomon's Temple were weeping, but it was hard for mere observers to tell the difference.

It's important to notice that the people are apparently seeking the Lord's favor, but are hindered by some false expectations. Also, the imperial throne changes hands rather often during this first few decades, so things can get a little confused back at the palace, while the distance makes communications very slow.

Ezra 6

We jump a couple of chapters. In them, we see that the mixed multitude of pagans Esarhaddon had shipped into the northern kingdom, eventually called "Samaritans," came and asked to participate in building the new temple. Keep in mind that King Josiah, as part of his reforms, had torn down the shrine at Bethel, and Syria had raided the one up in Dan, so they had only their typical idolatrous shrines scattered around. They honestly believed they were worshiping the same God as the Judeans.

However, the Judeans would not let them join. It's quite certain the explanation given was much longer than the short answer quoted in Ezra. At any rate, the Samaritans took offense and began politicking to have the work in Jerusalem halted, and eventually built their own shrine on Mount Gerizim. Again, keep in mind that the Medo-Persian Emperor is not the only figure with authority here; both the Persians and Medes retained their own national rulers and officials, plus there were lower ranking imperial officials, some with the same names passed around among the emperors. Thus, there is the passage of time while emperors die and successors take the throne, but there are also lower ranking officials acting on behalf of the emperor, and not always telling him until later, if at all.

So, we have a letter from the Samaritans and those appointed to manage imperial business in that region of the empire to one Artaxerxes who is obviously not the emperor who takes that name later. Given the time frame, this was still while Cyrus was Emperor, and the Samaritans avoided alerting him by writing to some other official, someone who wasn't aware of the Edict of Cyrus, but authorized to act on his behalf. Keep in mind that the order to rebuild the Temple was a fairly insignificant matter on the scale of imperial business. It was not a major issue to Cyrus, who probably signed the decree on the advice of someone like Daniel, like a lot of things major figures sign nowadays without giving much thought to the matter. But by this time, Daniel would have died and no one would be looking out for the Judeans.

Side notes: Osnapper is a common Aramaic version of Ashurbanipal. The reference to "Beyond the River" is the imperial name for the Fifth Satrapy that includes everywhere west of the Euphrates. Ezra also mentions a similar political campaign much later, under Emperors Xerxes and Artaxerxes (4:6). The Samaritans kept hiring lobbyists and bribing lower officials off and on for a very long time. At any rate, they wrote this letter to a lower official who had quick access to more ancient records from Babylon.

The response to this letter was exactly what the Samaritans hoped for, and they brought troops to shut down the Temple construction. It sat in this unfinished state for 15 years – through the end of Cyrus' reign, Cambyses and Smerdis, and into the reign of Darius I (starting around 521-520 BC).

It was under the preaching of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah that the leadership of the Returnees got back to work on the Temple. By now, Tattenai was the Satrap over this region. When he was alerted, and came to investigate, the Judeans showed him the Edict of Cyrus, which was no doubt news to him. The text makes the point that God was behind this resurgence, and kept anyone from actually hindering the work while it takes a year or so to hear back from Darius. Also notice that, while the previous lying letters from Samaria included mention of the city wall, the context of Tattenai's inquiry is accurately limited to the matter of the Temple only.

This brings us to our focal passage. Whoever ordered the work to stop in the past did not have it properly registered in the imperial records. Thus, the servants of Darius found only the Edict of Cyrus in the fortress of Ecbatana. This was a cooler, drier climate in the Zagros Mountains where scrolls would last longer than in the muggy, swampy air down in old Babylon. So the response was a very strong affirmation that Tattenai was to support the work from imperial resources there in the Fifth Satrapy, along with any ongoing support the Judeans might request. Indeed, anyone interfering would be impaled and stood upright on a timber pulled from his own home (Darius had actually done this to about 3000 Babylonians). Ezra notes in passing that this supportive attitude ran through the reign of his own Emperor Artaxerxes.

So the Temple was completed in roughly four years, upon which the people celebrated with a massive offering. The priests and Levites were put to work in Temple service on a rotation system. When the calendar came around, they also celebrated Passover and Unleavened Bread. It was the Lord who made them joyful.

Don't get hung up on the mention of Assyria. It was one of the many proper titles of the Emperor, since his predecessors subsumed previous empires under the throne. The Emperor's official title was a long list of vanquished kingdoms and empires. But in this case, it circles all the way back around to when the Israeli troubles with Mesopotamian empires started, and now the troubles are all quelled by the current rulers who are not at all hostile to the Judean people. Ezra writes this knowing that the imperial court is going to see it, and there's nothing wrong with giving credit where due.

Ezra 8:15-36

We now jump roughly 58 years later from the work on the Temple. During that time, Esther was able to save her nation from a plot to have them slaughtered. Thus, a certain descendant of the High Priestly line, Ezra, is alive to bring a more accurate teaching of the Covenant to the people in Judea.

In the previous chapter, Ezra records his commission from Emperor Artaxerxes. It includes a rather generous replay of what Darius had commanded a half-century before regarding support for the Temple services. Ezra identifies himself as a senior scribe. From the sound of things, he was probably something like a deputy to the viceroy reporting to the Emperor on Judean affairs. We skip over a list of notables who came with Ezra, adding to the Temple staff and boosting the leadership in Jerusalem. It appears his entourage was around 1500 priests and elders, and later

some Levites and the Nethinim (a special group of Temple attendants David and Solomon had organized as an inherited office).

We cannot identify the Ahava Canal, nor Casiphia. Our best guess is that they were both somewhere north of the Judean district of Babylon's suburbs. It was there he realized there were no Levites in the group slated to return to Jerusalem. So, he ordered some to appear, and a significant group responded. This was important, because the ones already in Jerusalem were way overworked.

Ezra had made such a strong testimony to the Emperor of Jehovah's power to protect them that he would now be embarrassed to ask for an armed escort. We know from secular histories of the time that things were rather unsettled along parts of the long journey. So Ezra called a fast according to the Covenant. At some point there came back a response from God that He would protect them.

Then Ezra delivered into the custody of the leadership of the priests and Levites all the dedicated treasures donated for the Temple. He makes the comment that this stuff is holy, and so the priests and Levites should be the only ones to handle it once they left the hands of those who donated.

After about nine more days, they got everything packed up and left. According to scholars, we could date their departure as 8 April 457 BC. They arrived about 24 July the same year, covering 900 miles. Ezra notes they arrived safe from the typical ambushes laid by raiders. They all camped out around Jerusalem for about three days, getting everything together in order for the official meet and greet.

They had a public ceremonial weigh-in at the Temple for all the treasures donated. They brought a very large offering of sacrificial animals as sort of a thanksgiving and catching up for what they missed by not being there in the first place.

Meanwhile, the imperial orders were delivered to the satrap and other officials over the region. This puts them on notice what the Emperor requires, and indicates his strong favor for the Judeans. The support from the imperial treasury was delivered in due time. Note: Artaxerxes' decree declared the priests and Levites tax exempt.

Whatever else we can say about Ezra, he clearly had a commission from God. Everything he did was rather strictly by the Covenant. This quickly became his trademark during his time there.

Ezra 10:1-17

Before his trip to Jerusalem, Ezra had already been involved in a project of collecting various manuscripts and documents associated with Moses and Israel, and assessing which were to be considered Scripture. It's almost guaranteed that this was a large project involving a great many scribes making new copies, and edits that would update the names and references to what was current in their day during the Exile. We can also be sure that Ezra was the final editor for this project. Thus, we can safely suggest he was the editor for Chronicles, his own book and Esther. On top of that, he reorganized the documents he didn't edit. Much of the Old Testament canon rests on the work of Ezra.

But his motive was hardly mere scholarly ambition. There is every reason to believe that he was deeply committed to an accurate understanding and obedience to the Covenant. Nothing mattered more to him than for the Remnant to be faithful. He was considering all of this when

he was warned that some of the Returnees had intermarried with the pagan locals. That is, these people intermarried without converting the pagans to the faith in Jehovah. There was always room to embrace the Covenant and become an Israeli, but that's not what they were doing. They were allowing the pagan wives to bring their idols into Judean households, and giving their covenant daughters over to pagan households.

This is the very thing that contributed to the downfall of Israel in the first place. It's part of why they were in exile. In the previous chapter Ezra has a very strong reaction to this news. He doesn't just tear his clothing, but pulls out some hair and whiskers, signaling that God's wrath was right outside the door, and it would be devastating. He made a very public display of this, fasting and weeping so that everyone would get the message. But more than that, his priestly prayer provoked a very real spiritual response in the people.

Thus we come to our focal passage. Some of the people in the area had heard and were deeply moved. They came to find out what they could do about this. They were quite fearful themselves at this point and quickly confessed their own guilt. So they agreed to make a solemn renewal of the Covenant and actively pursue obedience in this matter. They promised to stoutly support Ezra in taking charge of this serious problem.

So they all swore an oath. Ezra retired to one of the priestly chambers in the Temple and continued praying and fasting. Meanwhile, the leadership of the Returnees issued a proclamation on the matter. Everyone must gather in Jerusalem within three days or suffer confiscation of their property (it would become Temple property) and they would be excommunicated from their national identity.

Keep in mind that only a small staff lived in Jerusalem. It was the governor, his staff, the high priest and his staff, and Temple attendants. They occupied houses that were restored, but the rest of the Returnees lived scattered around in towns and villages outside of Jerusalem. And very little of the Temple plaza still stood at this time, so there wasn't a lot of space to gather near the Temple, the palace grounds, etc. Thus, when the folks from outside the city gathered, about the only place left to assemble was the Kidron Valley. This offered a rather large open flat space where the Valley of Hinnom joined it off the southern end of the ancient ridge of Zion. This open space narrows and reaches all the way up to the Water Gate, where King David's men slipped into the fortress through the spring. Anyone standing near the outer entrance to that spring could address the crowd below and likely be heard.

The assembly was 8 December 457 BC. They were trembling because of the gravity of the situation, and the cold rains didn't help. Ezra preached to them of their sins. He called for the level of separation required in the Law of Moses. The representative elders agreed it was a problem, but that making the assembly stand out in the rain was also a problem. They proposed that the elders report to Ezra in a rotation by districts. Ezra would sit as judge over all the cases and rule who had to put away their pagan wives. This would take awhile, because the extent of the problem was rather large and spanned multiple generations. It was complicated.

Only a handful of elders were opposed, and they would be dealt with in due time.

So it was the next month (ten days later) that the process began. This would have given the men time to warn their wives to convert or be sent home. The inquest ran two months, and was concluded in March. The text goes on to list those who had taken wives that refused to convert. Those women were sent back home.

This infuriated the pagan nations around them who simply did not understand, nor cared at all

about Jehovah's brand of holiness. Just when they had begun to tame this invasive presence, Ezra comes along and cuts all their family ties. It's impossible to separate religion and politics in understanding this conflict. For the pagan nations, it was a matter of political necessity to seduce the Judeans into idolatry. For the Judeans, it was a vital necessity to remain separate from both the religion and politics of the pagans.

Nehemiah 2

So far as anyone can tell, Ezra remained in Jerusalem after his book ends with the reforms in 457 BC. The various nations around them had lost all their hopes of seducing the Judeans. So they began a campaign of harassment. For Ezra, this called for some protection. Apparently he built up some fortifications around the Temple. The troublemakers notified Artaxerxes, who agreed with them that Ezra's commission did not include fortifications. Troops were dispatched to tear down the wall and burn the gates.

Sometime after that, word returned to the Judeans in Babylon of what happened. Eventually the news spread to various Judeans who had been taken into imperial service. Among these was Nehemiah, the Cup Bearer. Ostensibly this was the man who took a sip of the ruler's wine cup before it was served. This way, if the wine was poisoned, it sickened the Cup Bearer first. By this time it was mostly ceremonial, but the position had grown in influence in the imperial court. Nehemiah was thus essential personnel, one of the imperial councilors with what amounts to a reserve commission in the military at the rank of general. He was trained accordingly, but his primary mission was highly political as part of the inner circle trusted by the Emperor personally.

So in the previous chapter, in 445 BC when Nehemiah gets the news of the destruction of the fortifications of Jerusalem in the face of serious threats, he's heartbroken. He renders an eloquent prayer to Jehovah on behalf of His people. He fasts and prays for four months.

This left him looking rather dreary on the next public event at which he performed his ceremonial duties. This was normally forbidden, but Artaxerxes wasn't that difficult to serve. The Emperor noticed Nehemiah's haggard face, surmised that it was a matter of fasting and praying, and asked him what it was about. Nehemiah prayed silently in his heart while answering the Emperor. This was his one chance to do something for his nation and his God.

Surely Artaxerxes remembered sending troops to destroy the fortifications. But here Nehemiah makes a strong appeal, discussing how much of a threat there was to the people and the Temple that the Emperor so wanted to see finished. So the ruler asked his servant what he proposed to do about it.

Nehemiah took this as an answer to his prayers. He suggested going back in person to visit the people and rebuild the city fortifications with a proper imperial permit. Nehemiah's training gave him a reasonable idea of how long it would take. He pressed further for a specific written commission to pass through, and an order for sufficient timber from the Imperial Forester, so he could build the walls and restore the palace. Nehemiah would be the ranking imperial official in that part of the empire, so it naturally means having a palace for his residence.

Because Nehemiah was riding in a military chariot as an officer escorted by imperial troops, he got there a lot quicker than was normal for the Returnees traveling mostly on foot. He issued the copies of imperial orders to the Satrap and various governors and officials. This includes Sanballat who was governor of Samaria, and Tobiah, an Ammonite noble serving on the

Satrap's staff. They were deeply disturbed by this turn of events.

Upon arriving at Jerusalem, Nehemiah dismissed the bulk of his escort, keeping only a personal bodyguard required for members of the imperial court. It was enough to discourage, say, a false flag attack from Judah's enemies that could be blamed on someone else. The two previously mentioned enemies were joined by an Arab nobleman named Geshem. There's no doubt they had spies in and around Jerusalem, and Nehemiah suspected this, so he outsmarted them.

He waited three days, then at night slipped out quietly through the western gate that led down into the Tyropoeon Valley, riding a donkey and escorted by his bodyguard. He turned sharply left along the base of what was left of the city wall. The ancient valley had been filled with rubble at least once, so the sides of the ridge line weren't that steep any more. He managed to get around as far as the pool (later called Siloam) that Hezekiah had built out on the end of the ridge, when he dug the tunnel to divert the water from the Gihon Spring on the east face of the ridge. At the pool, the rubble was too thick to keep going along the base of the wall.

So Nehemiah was forced to take the path down into the valley, and turned to continue up the Kidron Valley a ways until he could see the main eastern gate near that ancient spring. Then he returned and made his way back up to where he first came out.

The next morning, he called the officials together, which would have included Ezra. Nehemiah revealed his prayers and the nature of his commission and his plans. It was the very blessed thing they had not dared to hope for, so they were quick to agree.

As soon as word got back to the trio of Judah's enemies, they sent a message to Nehemiah mocking the whole idea as rebellion. Nehemiah outranked them, but his God outranked the whole world. They had no say in the matter. He warned them not to get in the way or they would pay dearly.

Nehemiah 4

In the previous chapter is a long list of the groups and their assigned sectors on the wall. Those who lived against the wall built the section nearest their homes. A primary issue is that the entire city was still filled with rubble. Some of the stones were no longer suitable for building. The walls were made from locally mined limestone, and once exposed to fire, it softens into something like sandstone, easily crushed. That stuff had to be tossed down the slope. But there was plenty of reusable rubble from the tightly packed homes that once stood inside the wall.

When Sanballat and his friends got the report that the wall building had begun, they came to mock the effort publicly. Imagine a very loud conversation with dramatic gestures acted out in the hearing of everyone working, and the mocking laughter. Further, the reference to making sacrifices is meant to mock Jehovah. What good would it do to call on their pitiful national deity, who had already deserted them and allowed His house to be destroyed? They also mentioned the problem with burned limestone blocks.

Nehemiah's prayer is completely appropriate. If God is the one insulted, God can act to defend His own name. The people had been called to rebuild the city, and didn't bother to even respond to the provocations.

At the point where the wall was about half-finished, the trio of enemies coaxed the remaining Philistines in Ashdod to join them in a plan to conduct raids. This had to be done in secret, to avoid transgressing the published command of Emperor Artaxerxes. So the idea was to engage

in fast hit-n-run raids. Of course, they would all deny any culpability. But the plans leaked.

Nehemiah outlines his response. First, he prayed as always. Then, with his military training, he organized a defense. It was bad enough that the work crews had so much useless rubble to remove and it was killing their enthusiasm for building. But with the threat of raids, they were really starting to give up.

Ten different times, the leaders of the outlying communities begged for Nehemiah to release the workers so they could come home to defend against the obvious military activity among the surrounding nations. Instead, Nehemiah organized them to come and stay temporarily inside the city in support of their own work crews. He stationed defenders below the wall. He reminded the leadership that this was the business of their God Jehovah they were talking about, not some mere human pursuit. God is more than able to defend them.

This high degree of preparation discouraged the raiders. This was no longer an easy target. Any attack would turn out to be quite messy; the odds were now against the raids. Seeing how well this worked, Nehemiah forged a plan that saw half the able-bodied in full armor around the work crews in a rotation that probably served also to give folks a break from the heavy labor. Meanwhile, the crews were also armed, if not armored because of their work. It slowed the pace of the work, but it served to keep everyone focused on the mission of defending the city in the first place.

Further, Nehemiah stationed trumpeters with each work sector. Since some of the crews did not have direct line of sight to each other, this would provide a means of alarm so that extra defenders could rally to any part under attack. This gave the people the confidence to keep at it.

Finally, everyone lived tactically. The crews didn't go home at night, but camped out behind the rising walls. Nehemiah didn't spare himself nor his bodyguard the rigors, either. The leadership disrobed only to bathe in the evening, and then slept in their clothes in case the enemies tried any tricks at night. Keep in mind that it was virtually universal in that time and place for people to sleep nude, which would have made it hard to respond quickly to trouble.

Nehemiah 8

Once the walls were finished, Nehemiah appointed a governor over the city and organized security. Given how the Persians had in recent memory come to break down the walls, the people were a little skittish about living there. The rubble was eventually cleared and there was plenty of room, but few homes inside the wall.

But there was one more task. Nehemiah pulled out the roll Ezra had made of Israelis who had returned to the land. He double checked and found some priests who were questionable, so they were suspended from their duties until someone could arise through whom the Lord would speak through Urim and Thummim. Meanwhile, he updated the registry of eligible citizens of Israel.

Thus, we come to our focal passage, which begins a week later, 27 September 444 BC by our reckoning. This would be the Feast of Trumpets. At this point there was a large public square in front of the Water Gate – this is the primary eastern gate just above the ancient opening on the hillside for the Gihon Spring. The citizens gathered in this open square for this festival and asked Ezra to read the Books of Moses.

Ezra stood on a raised wooden platform. The text was in the more primitive Hebrew language

that was no longer spoken by Israelis. After a couple of generations in Babylon, they had absorbed the more urbanized dialect of Aramaic, a very similar language. It compares roughly to reading the Bible today in King's English to a bunch of American high school students. Most of the words were familiar, but the grammar, usage of some words, and archaic phrases were incomprehensible. So, dispersed in the crowd were men capable of rendering the ancient Hebrew into a more familiar Aramaic equivalent expression. It became common to keep the text in Hebrew and maintain trained translators on hand, a practice called *targum*.

It took Ezra about six hours working like this. You can be sure the people were quite stirred by the message, and many were weeping over the discovery of sins they never knew about. But the priests who already knew the Covenant well warned that this was not a day of weeping; that would come ten days later with the Day of Atonement. For now, they were obliged to celebrate with feasting.

So, the next day the leadership came to reexamine the instructions for the Feast of Booths. It had been neglected since the time of Joshua, seldom ever celebrated in full by the whole nation. So the whole assembly of Returnees fully cooperated and spent the rest of the festival in reviewing the Covenant more thoroughly.

Under the administration of Nehemiah, and the spiritual leadership of Ezra, there was a great revival among the Returnees, as they examined the Law of Moses freshly.

Nehemiah 13

We skip over some chapters that recount lots of names and details. Chapter 9 is a rich confession of how Israel had failed to honor the Covenant. It's very worthy of reading purely on a devotional basis. In the following chapters, Nehemiah recounts a better organization of the Temple services, the necessary support for the priests and Levites to stay on the job, and other matters of adding to the city population by a tithe of people living out in the villages.

You would think all of this would be enough to get them back on track. Nehemiah returned to his duties in the imperial court in 432 BC, indicating that he had stayed in Jerusalem 12 years. During his absence, things quickly fell apart.

Our focal passage opens with some background for the rest of the chapter. From a wider survey of the history of the Covenant (see Deuteronomy 23:3-7), we know that Edomites and Egyptians were allowed to join the Covenant (enter the Court of Israel) with the third generation of conversion. Thus, a household that embraced the Law of Moses would see their grandchildren fully embraced as Children of the Law. But for the Moabites and Ammonites, because they had conspired together with Balaam to subvert the process of the Conquest, were forever banned from full participation even after ten generations.

While a precise translation from the Hebrew and Aramaic texts is never easy, this section is particularly muddy to us. Near as we can tell, during that ceremony dedicating the wall around Jerusalem, a portion of the Law was read noting these conditions against Ammonites and Moabites. There was no excuse for not knowing, much less for violating them.

During the reign of Darius II (424-403 BC), Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem after a long absence. The year is unspecified, but it was at least a decade long absence. Whatever change it brought with the imperial succession, Nehemiah still has the same authority over the Judean people as before. He comes to discover that the High Priest at the time (Eliashib) had allied with

the Ammonites. Again, Ammonites were declared by God eternal enemies of the Covenant.

Eliashib had cleared out one of the larger chambers in the Temple building itself so that Tobiah could have his own apartment when he came to visit. Ordinary Judean laymen weren't allowed up on the elevated foundation of the Temple building, but Eliashib was hosting an Ammonite inside it. Nehemiah was so disgusted that he had Tobiah's stuff tossed out in the street. The room was ritually cleansed and all the Temple items were again stored there as was proper.

Worse, the Temple offerings had dropped to the point that the Levites had scattered out into the villages just so they could work and feed themselves. Only a few wealthy Levites could afford to stay in the city. Nehemiah forcefully demanded that the offerings be restored rather like a Temple tax.

As he toured the countryside where the rest of the population lived, he saw a very degraded observance of the Sabbath. People were working, and vendors were selling. It was worse in the City than anywhere else. So Nehemiah personally saw to it the gates of the City were locked during the Sabbath. He also personally warned the vendors to stop coming on the Sabbath. It became a duty of the Levites to guard the city gates on the Sabbath.

A final issue was the dilution of Covenant identity. As with his previous visit, Nehemiah found that men were marrying pagan women without first converting them. He noted very loudly that this was the sin of Solomon. Worse, some of these men were raising children who didn't even speak the Hebrew tongue. All of this was a serious violation of the Covenant Law, not to mention Imperial Law (see Esther 1). A man must rule his own household and his children speak his language.

It turns out that a primary reason Tobiah had been coming to visit was that Eliashib had married one of his sons to Sanballat's daughter (Tobiah and Sanballat were close buddies). This priest was defrocked immediately when Nehemiah found out. Once more, everyone who refused to abide by the Covenant was kicked out the Covenant advantages, treated as a pagan and non-citizen.

We come to the end of our history survey. The final lesson in this series will not be linked to a particular Bible passage.

Conclusion

There are two primary object lessons we can draw from the sum total of this series on the Law of Moses. The first is obvious, and flatly stated several times in Scripture. Take a look at Stephen's condemnation of the Jewish leadership in Acts 7. More than once the Bible condemns Israel as the single most obstreperous nation ever. If God had chosen any other nation to carry the mission of Israel – to live in such a way as to shine the light of revelation to the rest of mankind – things would have turned out quite differently.

God Himself says this. Things could have been better, but that doesn't mean they would have been good. We can be sure some things would not have worked out very well with any nation He could have chosen. This brings us the second lesson which isn't quite so obviously stated: It is impossible to raise up a human nation that will consistently live up to the standards of

Biblical Law. It's a lesson you should grasp from subtle hints throughout the Bible.

This is why the Kingdom of Christ is a kingdom of hearts. There can be no such thing as a Christian nation. You cannot *learn* to be spiritually born; it is not a human decision but a divine miracle. Without a personal commitment and loyalty, no law formulated for political organization will keep us at peace with God. And it is utterly impossible to create a political system that excludes those who refuse to fully commit from the heart. There is no human means for verifying a heart-led consciousness.

Keep in mind: The heart-led consciousness was the norm across the entire Ancient Near East. This is what was expected of people as the basic minimum. It was the foundation of language itself, and written into the moral standards, and thus legal standards, across the board. Yet those nations still struggled to keep people in that mode on a daily basis. How much more difficult is the heart-led way in a time and culture that militates against the very idea itself, as it does in the West?

This rejection is the very foundation of Western Civilization. We console ourselves in recognizing that the West is dying before our eyes. What replaces it so far appears to be a little more amenable to the concept of not trusting solely in human reasoning. There will be at least a little more room for the heart-led way in the future. It remains to be seen what kind of accommodation we will find, but it will be better than in the past.

But that won't make any difference if we don't take seriously the duty to live the heart-led way, and to apply that consciousness to Biblical Law. The Covenant is the message; it is our testimony. Not just in the obedience, but in the fundamental value system and the blessings we reap within that value system. Thus, our *shalom* is our testimony.

So it's not the specific provisions of the Law of Moses that we should learn, but what those provisions say about the character and nature of our God. You'll notice how the crappy performance in the history of Israel always worked out well enough when the leadership was genuinely trying to please the Lord. He was merciful, in part because His own glory was at stake. The heart-led commitment was the key, not the objective performance of the requirements.

This is exactly what Jesus taught *as the Law of Moses*. Everything He did up to the Cross was a perfect fulfillment of Moses; He was superior to Moses in His Person and role, not to mention having higher standards than Moses. But He remained fully observant of the Law of Moses until His resurrection.

If you want to know what happened during the years between the close of Nehemiah's ministry and the birth of Christ, you can see it outlined in my book, *Ancient Truth: Old Testament History*, Chapter 12: Inter-Testamental Period.² I can tell you in sum that the events represent very little of the Covenant passion that drove men like Nehemiah.

It shows us that Jesus offered His nation one last chance to get it right. In theory, they could have seized the moment and turned things around. They could have gone on to a glorious future with Him as the Messiah and King. God would have gladly set them free from Roman domination. They had long ago rejected that, and we should hardly be surprised. You and I struggle to meet the mandate as individuals, never mind as a community of faith with no formal organization of human activity.

² <https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/278161>

And yet, the only hope you and I have is to keep in the forefront the heart-led consciousness of *shalom* as an informal community of faith. That may change a little in the future, but you may never see it if you don't first accept the obligation to take the leadership wherever you are, and walk in Biblical Law. Keep the faith you have now and let's see what God has planned.