

Commentary on the Minor Prophets

By Ed Hurst

Print on Demand Edition (revised)

Copyright 2013, 2021 by Ed Hurst

Copyright notice: People of honor need no copyright laws; they are only too happy to give credit where credit is due. Others will ignore copyright laws whenever they please. If you are of the latter, please note what Moses said about dishonorable behavior – “be sure your sin will find you out” (Numbers 32:23)

Permission is granted to copy, reproduce and distribute for non-commercial reasons, provided the book remains in its original form.

The Minor Prophets:

Hosea

Joel

Amos

Obadiah

Jonah

Micah

Nahum

Habakkuk

Zephaniah

Haggai

Zechariah

Malachi

Introduction to the Minor Prophets

Their prophetic writings were of no small impact, but were generally shorter and more narrowly focused in scope compared to the four Major Prophets. While it's possible Obadiah is the oldest, we can't be sure. But those we know about range all over the history of Judah and Israel, beginning at least as early as 830 BC, and running to Malachi more than four centuries later. Nonetheless, each of these shorter prophetic books echoes the eternal principles, and the call of God to His people to come back and obey the Covenant.

Introduction to Hosea

Hosea was a Northern prophet to the Kingdom of Israel, though he did make reference to Judah. The approximate dates of his ministry were 760-720 BC, starting near the end of the reign of Jeroboam II, ending sometime past the Fall of Samaria. He was a little younger than Amos, and somewhat older than Isaiah and Micah. Jonah was probably still alive when Hosea was a boy.

None of us would want to imagine taking Hosea's place. From the text we gather that he married a woman who should have been executed as an adulteress. God commanded Hosea to do what was contrary to good social order, though not precisely contrary to the Law of Moses. He obeyed that command, and experienced first hand the passion and sorrow God felt, bound by a similar covenant to Israel, both the nation and the kingdom. There are many instances where prophets were commanded to do things unlawful or at least socially shocking, so this is no different. We tend to think of the Law of Moses in Western terms and cannot quite grasp the ancient Hebrew understanding of such things, including how the Covenant recognized priorities. Hosea did as God commanded, even if he knew it was going to destroy his personal life. The whole point was noting that such a woman lived and operated openly in a kingdom that treated God the same. God also knew what was coming, but proved His own sacrificial love and faithfulness against the idolatry-adultery of the Northern Kingdom.

Hosea 1

Hosea dates himself during a period when the Northern Kingdom was at its peak of power and prosperity. It was also horribly perverted with several temples to the false gods established two centuries before. The temples were busy but it was the poor and defenseless that was being trod underfoot by all this traffic in false piety. Whatever religion they had was a worthless sham.

Not only were these temples an abomination and insult to God, but parts of the Covenant of Moses had been thrown out. While some of the rituals were familiar, the meaning was entirely pagan. It was back to the golden calf worship. So, God commanded His prophet, Hosea, to go and marry a common prostitute. She would be the sort of woman who cared not a whit for genuine sacrificial love, or stability or any other thing among God's covenant promises. She wanted what she wanted, the luxurious life of a popular hooker. She was a perfect symbol for the Kingdom of Israel.

Their first child was a son named Jezreel, to commemorate the sins of Jehu (2 Kings 10:1-28). Jeroboam II as reigning king was a descendant of Jehu. We have a hard time understanding how it could be said Jehu operated out of zeal for Jehovah, yet what he did to the House of Omri would be done to the House of Jehu. What is so easy to miss is how Jehu's reform was political in purpose, not a Covenant renewal, because he continued in the sins of Jeroboam I. In other words, his reform was political in nature. The Omride Dynasty had drifted into worship of Baal and his associate, Melkart (then the god of Tyre and Sidon). All he did was reduce the pagan religious options to the original sin of Jeroboam, claiming to worship Jehovah at temples He despised. For this reason, not only the royal house, but the entire kingdom would be broken and taken away in exile.

Then came the daughter, named *Lo-Ruhamah* ("Not Pitied" i.e., no mercy), to symbolize God's vow to cease protecting the Northern Kingdom, even as He continues to protect the Southern. Judah would be delivered from the same Assyrians about to take Israel. They would be saved by God's direct intervention, not by any human hand. Yet another son was born later, named *Lo-Ammi* ("Not My People"). The Covenant was irreparably broken.

Yet God then turns and reasserts the promise He made to Abraham, that his descendants would outnumber the sand on the seashore. Since there would be no more Israel, the name would pass to another, New Israel with a New Covenant. Thus, the language at the end of the chapter is completely parabolic, because it would be literally impossible to fulfill any more.

Hosea 2

The first verse here actually belongs with the previous chapter, ending with the promise that God shall make a new people for Himself, and they will receive all the mercy He wanted to give Israel.

Then we take up the drama where Hosea instructs his children to plead with their mother. Naturally, this symbolizes God instructing His faithful remnant to call out to the rest of the kingdom. God is warning Israel that all the good things – the *shalom* – were covenant blessings.

By rejecting the terms of the Covenant, they were rejecting the blessings. The prosperity, the security and stability, would all be removed.

Israel had acted as if those things came from the Canaanite tinted worship of “Jehovah,” in all those paganized temples not sited on the appointed place for God’s Name. When the blessings failed, would they realize their mistake? Sadly, they did not. Thus, the promise went to a new Israel. Only those who properly call on the Name of the Lord, who make Him Lord indeed, will be His Israel.

As a refrain from the first verse, the Lord then calls this New Israel “His People” who will find His mercy.

Hosea 3

Gomer managed to so ruin her life and ended up in slavery. So it was with God’s wife, Israel. She was enslaved to her idolatries, and would need redemption.

So in the literal narrative, Hosea gathers the sum for purchasing a slave – thirty pieces of silver. Half the amount was paid in silver, the other half in barley, roughly seven bushels (barley was relatively cheap compared to other grains). We can safely assume that this was about all Hosea could gather, and it probably left him quite broke. He ordered her to serve probation as a widow, having no man at all, not even Hosea. We can’t know the details, but it was a time of ritual cleansing before she could regain conjugal rights.

Hosea goes on to explain that this symbolized how God would deal with the idolatry problems of the nation as a whole, not just the Northern Kingdom. They must do without their national identity, as a widow bereft of her identity as some great man’s wife. They must do without any Davidic king or prince, without any official priesthood or even the Temple, never mind going without the pagan worship, as well. In the end, only those who repent and seek the Last King of the House of David, the Messiah, would know the Lord’s favor again.

This was fairly literal as prophecies go. To this day, being Jewish or an Israeli means nothing before the Lord. The only way they can reclaim any portion of their original inheritance is through the Messiah, the One Lamb of God, and no other path is open to them. So Peter told them beginning with the first day after the Ascension. Thus it is with all humanity.

Hosea 4

From here on we see little reference to Hosea’s personal life. Instead, he waxes quite lyrical in Hebrew symbolism.

The first image is that of an Ancient Near Eastern potentate, a nomad sheik. It is Jehovah assembling His advisors and tribal elders to hold a public hearing against someone who transgressed His tribal law. This is in part fairness to the accused, but also serves as an example to all to respect His wrath. In this case, the accused is His own people, whom He might often refer to as His wife.

First, He summarizes the violation, then the penalty. They are guilty of flagrant dishonesty and violence, breaking all the vows they made at Sinai. For this, God will curse the ground upon which the kingdom stands. Nothing they touch will be blessed.

He blames the priests, of course, and quite justly. As the spiritual guardians of the Covenant, they were the first to step forward and compromise truth for the sake of political and material gain. They eagerly offered their expertise in cutting out the passages of Moses' Law that did not fit the new political reality, of a king who insisted his nation not go to Jehovah's Temple, just inside the border of the Southern Kingdom. Instead, Jeroboam raised up two other temples, and demanded the truth be reshaped to his political whims. While they still called on the name of Jehovah, the rituals and facilities bore only a vague resemblance to the Covenant Law. When the priests compromise, the people are not far behind.

In a short time, the priests encouraged all sorts of idolatrous practices. Though the two temples still standing at Gilgal and Bethel ("House of El" which Hosea renames Bethaven, "House of Vanity") see much use, there was plenty of traffic in every other shrine throughout the kingdom. The reforms of Jehu hardly reduced the spiritual adultery of the people, so it hardly reduced their pursuit of the most degrading Canaanite religious filth. In other words, he reduced the slavish devotion to the fashionable gods of Tyre and Sidon in favor of the good old local idolatry.

When any single man strives to observe God's Laws, the Lord Himself stands to support such devotion by blessing the man's work, his family and everything he touches. The purity of his character will give him purity in understanding the world around him. When a man pursues his personal pleasure against those Laws, it spreads like cancer. Adultery of the heart against God will reap every form of adultery. As the men are so quick to chase hedonistic pleasures, they will be totally unable to prevent their wives and daughters from debauchery. God would not lift a finger to restrain the evil they so very much love.

As the Tribe of Judah was both the largest and the royal tribe of the Southern Kingdom, and at times that kingdom was reduced to little more than some portion of Judah's tribal land grant, so the Northern Kingdom's largest and royal tribe was Ephraim. By this time, they had also been reduced to pretty much Ephraim's land grant. Thus, whereas the southern was called Judah, the northern was often called Ephraim.

Hosea 5

Hosea turns his attention specifically to the leadership of the Northern Kingdom. He calls upon the priests, the noble houses and the royal family. As shepherds, they were worse than negligent. Instead of beacons of light – referring to a pair of mountain peaks where fires were lit to warn of approaching enemies – they strove hard to keep the people under bondage to idols.

Their evil was not hidden from God. He knows them better than they know themselves. For their part, it's hard to put into words the depth of alienation from God. It was as if they had never heard of Jehovah. It was so bad that they were bringing the Southern Kingdom down. Because of this vast departure from the place where God could be found, they would wander the whole world, claiming to seek their God, refusing to meet Him on the clear and ancient

terms of the Covenant. Hosea said his generation was born so deeply in idolatry that they were in effect Gentiles.

Then Hosea paints a dramatic scene. He calls for warning trumpets and cries of alarm to be sounded from the highest peaks between Ephraim and Judah, there in the border region of Benjamin. Before they know it, the whole Kingdom of Israel would be swept away, as Assyria marched toward Jerusalem.

God further compares the Northern Kingdom to those who violate every human custom and law, such as those who move the most sacred ancient landmarks. A modern comparison would be bulldozing the Roman Colosseum, or the Acropolis. They were utterly senseless about the ancient ways of the Hebrew people, the customs and the underlying intellectual assumptions. Instead, they pursued what was then fashionable human wisdom, derived from the most frivolous pagan idolatries. Eating away at the very fabric of what characterized these people before God, destroying their identity – again, it was as if turning them into Gentiles.

In utter foolishness, the rulers of Ephraim sent to their greatest enemies for relief from their own loss of identity. Since they were seeking “God” in some pagan place far from the Promised Land, God would visit them as a devouring horde sent from that land. What does a lion leave behind after attacking a defenseless lamb? So would Ephraim be when God was through punishing her.

Hosea 6

From the very beginning, the Laws of God were aimed at drawing a genuine personal commitment. The distinction between heartfelt commitment and mere lip service was as old as the Fall itself, and has always been rather easily recognized. The prophet Hosea warned the Northern Kingdom that holiness had really very little to do with the politics of which temple people went to, and everything to do with simply knowing God.

All we can really know about God is what He requires of us. For someone born under the Covenant given at Mount Sinai, it was simply too easy to find out what God required. Hosea warned the Northern Kingdom that that ancient covenant remained binding upon them. His call was simply to return to the God of the Covenant. It was this covenant that defined the punishments they now endured. But these were merely a reflection of ancient truths too well known at that time, in that part of the world.

Men are creatures of time, sensitive to the passage of time, unable to break free from the chains of time awareness. Thus, Hosea reminds them that when God afflicts, if a man turns, he must pass through the sorrow for a couple of days. It takes time for us to work through the weight of our sins and sorrows. But if we survive that, on the third day we typically come to the place where we are truly penitent and ready to face reality as God defines it. We see this pattern throughout the Bible narrative, and surely in the death and resurrection of Christ.

If we long for Him, time is fleeting and each new day brings new joys. In no time at all, the dry season passes into the early rains, and then the latter rains, refreshing us again and again. We, on the other hand, are more like the dew of morning, passing with the slightest heating of the

day. We cannot be trusted, but Our Lord never fails. There would always be prophets of His Word to remind everyone it's not about going through the motions, but committing oneself to God's own heart.

But Hosea reminds us that what characterizes the place is the kind of people in it. Gilead was rocky, riven with deep ravines and covered with thorny brambles – in ancient terms, a really tough neighborhood because it was the best hangout for criminal types. There was a highway through there, but you needed well-armed troops to use it much. Still, the whole kingdom might as well be a Gilead, because the foul priests of the Samaritan cult established by Jeroboam would waylay anyone seeking to visit even the ancient place of the Tabernacle in Shechem. The priests were plundering the people. It was religious fraud on a massive scale, both literally and in spiritual terms.

There simply aren't sufficient words to express the shocking betrayal of the Covenant, to which everyone born in the nation was bound. Even Judah was in line for some just wrath due them like a harvest from planting seeds of evil.

Hosea 7

This chapter is a classic example of Hebrew symbolic logic. The same symbol becomes a theme, used differently each time it appears. This is the very nature of Hebrew language and thought in itself, where context is everything. The baker, his oven and his bread are used repeatedly in different ways.

The nature of a Law Covenant is such that repentance must be made for all the sins piled up. The Lord has promised to wipe every sin for which even relatively small penitence is offered, but remembers everything done in flagrant injustice. This injustice rots the entire kingdom starting in the palace. Because of this, the fire of God's wrath smolders continuously. Thus, four kings in rapid succession assassinated each his predecessor. Yet this same wrath, which burns like the baker's fire, is not sated because none turns from sin. Instead, it festers like yeast in bread dough, and will surely bring even bigger changes soon enough.

Their best ideas are all half-baked. They run to Egypt, then to Assyria, and who knows where next? Yet it's anywhere but God, of course. So when He spreads His wrath to deal with sin, they will be captured in the very act of fleeing God. They have no trouble confessing their sorrows, but cannot bring themselves to confess their sins, which have caused their misery.

God had raised them to such an incredible privilege over the other nations of the world. He made them His personal means of combating sin, but they have become so enmeshed in sin themselves, they are worse than a bow which never shoots the same way twice. At this rate, they'll become a standard joke in the land of Egypt, a place that is known more changes of dynasty than almost any empire in history. It's pretty bad when someone like the Egyptians laugh at your instability.

Hosea 8

Hosea is commanded to lay out precisely where the sins of the Northern Tribes began. What are the fundamental violations?

The Lord orders Hosea to sound the trumpet. But it matters not what human army comes, because it is God Himself who comes against the whole nation. His own Temple will not be safe from His wrath because of the depth of their sins. Even a semi-literate child will understand what follows, because it will be a simple matter of transgressing the very Covenant that defined Israel's identity as a nation. Claims to being the people of Jehovah would be a joke, since nothing that defines "Israel" is present in the people. The name "Israel" isn't just a place or people, but a mission of revealing Jehovah.

God had rejected every king since Jeroboam I. Yes, that nobleman had been called by God to rein in the son of Solomon. When that failed, He surely did call Jeroboam to rule, but warned him not to depart from the Covenant. Like a fool, the new king promptly ignored the warning and set up rival temples. He refused to trust in God, so God rejected him. Not a single king since then was legitimate. That God may have prevented Judah from retaking Ephraim was more a matter of the failures of Judah.

Everything about the Northern Kingdom was, at best, man made. In every way, large and small, what they did was man's pitiful effort, aping the Covenant at times, but never coming under it in any fundamental sense. Thus, not a single promise of the Law would be theirs. Instead, the curses were their inheritance.

Indeed, they might as well be Gentiles masquerading as Israel. It was a cheap imitation. The vessel of light made itself into a chamber pot. With a broken marriage, they hired themselves out as prostitutes, calling each of their lovers "husband" in a sickening charade.

How do you explain that every altar of sacrifice was not simply a place to waste resources, but a call-up of demons? They regarded the Covenant as a foreign concept. Sure, the rituals bore some superficial resemblance, but it was not to the Lord they sacrificed. He will forget them and remember their sins instead, because they forgot Him. And if Judah persists in like sins, all their mighty fortresses would be no more than a dry canebrake, consumed quickly by a small spark.

Hosea 9

In the big middle of harvest festival, Hosea warns this could be their last harvest of anything except the wrath of God. They were observing some semblance of the old Hebrew festivals recorded in Moses, but ignoring the heart of the Covenant, because so much of what they did was dedicated to pagan deities.

Hosea mocks the party mood of the kingdom. Instead of a proper feasting, it's more like a cheap whore running from one threshing floor to another. As symbols of God's covenant blessings, both the threshing floor and wine press would soon be empty, nothing to celebrate. Indeed, the land itself would be emptied of the residents. Hosea mocks that they cry to go back to Egypt, but they'll be living in Assyria where kosher will be long forgotten, and God would never again

accept any offering from them. The great historical devastations would simply add Samaria to their list.

They treat real prophets as fools and madmen, and so would never see the wrath of God coming toward them, until it was on them. They preferred the lying seers who were more interested in profits than prophecy. Hosea says that their actions compare favorably to the filthy pagan ritual sexual abuse in Gibeah during the Period of Judges. It's hard to imagine how far they had fallen from God's favor. Their sexual depravity would not only bear no children, but the ones already living would be taken from them, slaughtered by Assyrian troops. Indeed, the terror would cause spontaneous miscarriages and lactation would fail for fear.

Hosea then reminds them of that awful day at Gilgal when Israel insisted on having a king. Saul was hardly a regal monarch, and brought great shame on the nation. But the central control of a single political authority destroyed the possibility of righteous elders refusing to lead their people into sin. They chose greatness as humans measure such things, and ended up lost to history.

Hosea 10

The voice in which this chapter is written jumps around so much, sometimes mocking, sometimes characterizing the Lord, or the people, or something else entirely. It can be very confusing what Hosea is trying to say. That's altogether fitting, since Israel is utterly confused about their religion and covenant duties.

God permitted the northern tribes to pull away from the political control of David's grandson, Rehoboam. At no time did the Lord encourage Jeroboam's political ploy of building the unauthorized temples at Bethel and other places. From time to time these rival temples were increased in number, sometimes moved, and so forth. Hosea notes when God first gave the Northern Kingdom sufficient prosperity to make a go of their own way without the Southern Tribes, they simply used it as an excuse to build more temples and engage even greater apostasy. All this heavy investment in temple facilities was reserved as rich plunder for Assyria.

As God's tolerance for the Northern Kingdom ran out, they no longer had kings worthy of the title. The people knew why, that it was because they had betrayed their God, and how badly it hurt them to follow the unrepentant kings. These kings had promised the moon and never fulfilled any of it, always secretly scheming. People today would love to forget the harsh wrath God has promised to rulers who are so treacherous. Hosea compares them to toxic weeds growing among the crops, spoiling things by simply being present. The folks in the big capital city knew their heavy investments in the golden calves in their rival temples were just a big magnet for plundering conquerors.

So the kings would be as powerless as twigs in heavy sea swells, driven by forces too great for them to understand. The temples would become like fresh plowed ground, a perfect invitation for weeds and such. The people would beg for just about any other fate than what Assyria would dish out on them.

By calling up the image of that utterly despicable cult at Gibeah, which nearly saw Benjamin decimated as a tribe, Hosea reminds them that the stain of such sin characterizes the whole kingdom. It's not enough that the Tribe of Benjamin allowed this cult to take root and grow, but with unspeakable arrogance defended this filth and dared the rest of the nation to do something about it. So it was with Samaria, shaking her fist in the face of God. Hosea then paints the picture of a young heifer with no sense. She gets a light burden and is allowed to eat all the grain she likes while threshing. Pulling a threshing sledge is pretty nice work, but pulling a plow is serious hard labor without any immediate reward. By rejecting God's light discipline under the Law of Moses, they were insisting on slavery and exile, with no hope of recovery.

They could always repent, but that's the last thing they'll do. Instead, they'll dream up even greater insults against Jehovah. Samaria will become just one more mound of rubble, gathering dust, and a byword in human memory to invoke the image of grave disaster and destruction. Otherwise, she would be utterly forgotten.

Hosea 11

When Israel was but a small nation, the Lord called them up from their Egyptian slavery and brought them to a new land. It was the Heavenly Father who taught them to walk. He would later call His other Son from Egypt, too. Unlike that One, Israel fought Him all the way through the wilderness. Before they even came close, while Moses and God were yet conferring on the mountain, they began embracing the ancient Semitic cult of the Golden Bull. This would be an image upon which their invisible Baal would ride. Of all the pagan religions common to these people, this cult was the closest in terms of rituals and practices to what God was telling Moses in the Covenant. It reappeared in full force with the sins of Jeroboam.

But Israel was more reliable and consistent in their failures than in their commitment to the Covenant. So, very early the Lord began teaching them how to think and live, much like a beloved son. Instead of slaves with the harness of an animal, God made them a gentle harness for humans, treating them with respect. Instead of forcing them to eat while wearing the yoke, He removed it so they could freely consume all they could hold. In a very real sense, God served them.

But Israel was the upside down, backward nation. Egypt enslaved them; they readily traded their freedom repeatedly by calling out to Egypt as their savior. Thus, some time after this prophetic warning, the last King of the North, Hoshea, tried to rebel against Assyria by offering the annual tribute to Egypt as a bribe, instead. And it failed miserably (see 2 Kings 17). By the time Assyria was on the march, it was too late for repentance.

But it really broke God's heart. How could He destroy His own? It's not as if they were Sodom and Gomorrah. God promised to hold back a measure of His wrath upon them. Many of them would survive. We know some of them escaped Assyrian exile and slipped back into Judah. Oh, what they could have had! They could have been like a lion calling his whelps to the hunt, jittery and eager. Instead they would have some few straggling refugees responding to the Lion of Judah. Full redemption would be available to the Northern Tribes only in the Messiah.

Thus, the Lord laments how Ephraim had attempted to hedge God in with their self-deception. Only Judah was tolerable to God.

Hosea 12

Woven like a tapestry, Hosea points out the contrast between Jacob and the Northern Kingdom that took his new name, Israel.

Most English translations miss the point in the first few lines. Hosea depicts Ephraim as trying to herd the eastern winds like sheep. This would be the destructive hot blast called sirocco, which can be deadly. They send envoys to Assyria while trading with Egypt, two implacable enemies. Yes, Judah has been foolish, too, and God will deal the Southern Kingdom in good time. Meanwhile, Hosea warns Samaria that, having taken Jacob's name, they should learn from his mistakes.

Jacob began as a real achiever, if only by grabbing his brother's heel. Yet by his own astonishing physical endurance he managed to wrestle an angel, and was given a rather ambiguous name. *Yis-ra èl* means both "Wrestles with God" and "God's Champion." He cried out to God and was heard, led farther along the path of his travails until his primitive faith grew into full flower. He found Jehovah right there at Bethel, but Jeroboam built one of his pagan temples there. The God of Israel does not ride a cow. Hosea notes they still had time to return to their God.

Were they so much in love with the Canaanite religion? Hosea refers to Ephraim as a Canaanite, a term also referring to a merchant. However, the term is often used to mean a thieving cheating merchant. And so were Ephraim's merchants: Nothing exactly illegal, but greedy and always shaving corners so as to amass unjustified profits. Oh, but no one could bring sufficient evidence to take them to court, so there was nothing really wrong! The whole country was dishonest, where God had commanded merchants be generous, willing to take small losses in favor of honesty, because He would reward them.

The defining event that set Israel apart from all other nations was the Exodus. They hardly bothered to celebrate the Feast of Tents. Would they like to live in tents again? The God of that great national escape and crushing of Egypt was the One who would destroy their cities and homes. This same God had sent plenty of prophets, some using fairly direct and literal warnings, some with artistry and visions, and some with good literate Hebrew parables. Yet here were pagan shrines in Gilead, a grand festival slaughtering of the bulls to pagan gods in Gilgal. Their huge investment in securing the favor of these nonexistent deities would lie rotting on the ground when Assyria was through.

Jacob herded real sheep and was cheated repeatedly the way Ephraim's businessmen do. Jacob the Cheater was cheated, but God took care of him. He gained two wives and vast swarms of herd animals, and much more. That's because, after all those years, what he really cared about was pleasing God. So it was with the Prophet Moses who led them out of Egypt. There was a shepherd of shepherds! Were it not for that one prophet, there would have been no Israel. Had they forgotten that God at one point had planned to wipe out the nation and raise one up from Moses to replace them? And who led most of those rebellions against Moses? Ephraim. Nothing

had changed since then. God will surely deal with them according to their long centuries of contemptuous rebellion.

Hosea 13

The ancient Hebrew peoples knew that beyond this life there was something, but it was utterly beyond human understanding. Thus, we find the Hebrew term *Sheol* has no modern equivalent beyond simply recognizing that your chance to make peace with God is gone. It was more important as an image with grand overtones, rather than as a word describing anything in particular. In this case, the Northern Kingdom was passing into *Sheol*, the abode of the dead. It can't be a good thing for those who resist God's calling.

Ephraim was once a proud power in the nation, all the more so as the royal tribe of the Northern Kingdom. It was all surrendered by abuse of privilege. Having led the nation into reverencing the Golden Calf, that despicable thing they raised up while Moses communed on Mount Sinai with God, it was hardly any more difficult to slip into worship of the various Baals and Ashtartes. How can people worship something their own hands have made?

How easily the nation forgets the God who carried them as gently as a shepherd bears a lamb through the Wilderness! Being their Father was not good enough? How about becoming, then, the most devastating predator ever? There are hints here that Creation itself will become their worst enemy, because they have offended the very earth upon which they stand. They foolishly demanded God give them a king. Kings were granted as a means of wrath to discipline them, but to no avail. So now they will be taken away. Subtly the Lord says they are not even worthy of His discipline.

As surely as the child in the womb must come in his time, so the travail of sorrow is about to come due on Samaria. Unlike newborns, eager to be out of the womb, Ephraim tries to delay the inevitable. God is characterized as one deeply torn by the fatherly compassion against the immeasurable sin. One moment He resolves to save them; the next He swears He'll take on the face of Death Himself. Once again, God's justice asserts itself and their doom is assured. Pity and compassion will be left behind in Heaven when He comes to visit.

Hosea 14

Hosea prophesied under the Covenant of Moses to a nation sworn under that covenant. His prophecy was about the unjust conduct of the Northern Kingdom, starting with the royal house and the priests, down through the nobles and lesser lights to the very poorest of peasants. While it fully symbolized deeper spiritual truths, this was about the Law. Could the Northern Kingdom return to the Law of Moses, everything bearing down upon her would come to a screeching halt.

Thus, Hosea calls out to Ephraim to repent, to come before God and confess their sins. Were they to do so, the sins of the nation against the Covenant would be forgiven. This holds true for nations and individuals and everything in between. People who embrace the justice of God, the invisible moral fiber of the universe, they can expect His quick response. The earthly consequences of violating His Laws will be wiped away. Could Assyria do this? Could Egypt

(as the source of war horses)? Could any of the gods they made with their hands? Only Jehovah can offer and fulfill such a promise.

More, the Lord had grand and mighty plans for Samaria. They still had a place in His plan to reveal His redemption to all mankind. They could expect a double portion of His promises under His Laws, as family members set to inherit His Word of Truth. Hosea draws the image of a vast and mighty tree, with all the different fruits mankind seeks to be filled with the good things from God, symbols of the outpouring of love on His Creation. These blessings would come to those who would find themselves in the shade of Ephraim's penitent presence on the Land – "In you all families of mankind will be blessed."

Hosea offers a final image of that penitent kingdom. Then he calls out to whoever is wise to recognize the truth of his message.

Introduction to Joel

We know almost nothing about the prophet Joel. There are some 14 people in the Bible with that name, and he's none of the others. Nor do we know when he prophesied. However, we note how consistently those who insist it had to be a late date (after the Return from Exile) are almost always the same people who rip the Scripture to shreds and don't seem to believe much of the Bible at all. There is some evidence for their position, but I find the evidence for putting him in the reign of Joash, (c. 830 BC) the boy king, is pretty strong. However, it probably doesn't matter much, since the message is timeless – ignore God's Laws and Creation itself will fight you.

Joel 1

His name echoes the declaration, "Jehovah is God!" There is no other god, and no other law. Joel begins immediately demanding a hearing. He calls attention to a locust plague so destructive nothing edible to man or beast remained. This thing typically blew in on the east wind from Arabia, and at every stage of life, locusts eat everything in sight. We aren't sure if the four different names for this devouring hoard are actually different species or simply different stages of the locusts' life cycle. At any rate, nothing was left. Nothing.

No one should forget this, not for the next three generations or more. Joel rails at the nation for acting like drunkards, slurping up the generosity of God's provision and hardly remembering His name. Now they'll be forgetting the taste of wine, because the vines will take years to recover. Let their sorrow be like a bride bereaved on her wedding day. Let the priests mourn, if for no other reason than they won't get any offerings to feed them, as there will nothing to bring to the Temple.

Might as well call a fast; no one will have food anyway. What does it take for God to get your attention, Joel asks. Do you have to starve? Does it take the lamenting of all your starving herds? This is the Day of the Lord, when He comes to remove sin. Since they have been too long wedded to sin, they will lose so very much.

Joel 2

The Day of the Lord, that ancient symbol of God's judgment upon sin, is at hand. Those with clean hands need not fear, but those wedded to sin will suffer destruction with it. Joel portrays the locusts as an invading army, spreading like a black cloud upon the land. He uses various images to describe how a lush green carpet of vegetation before them is turned into a desert behind them, making an awful noise as they pass. It's not simply the loss of vegetation, but an utterly frightening scene, one that can bring shock and deep depression in itself. Would you like to be that powerful? Execute His Word, starting in your own life, says Joel.

And you could always execute His justice now, before the doom of judgment falls. However great and long are your sins, the day you turn is when healing begins. Repent; live in the Land of Repentance, under the Sky of Mercy. Just as Joel called for the trumpet of war, now he calls for the trumpet of fasting and penitence. Joel draws for us the most extreme measures of crying before the Lord. There is no human exemption, because all have participated in this sin. The only basis for sparing, though, is God's own Name. If they call on His Name, they will stand in the place of mercy.

Finally, Joel holds forth the standing promise of that mercy. What can we expect when people call on Him and repent of sin? Particularly in the case of His own nation, Israel, can we expect Him to rush to their aid? Instead of a devouring hoard, even greater harvests will come. Yes, the stench of sin will rise up as it dies, in this case symbolized by the sudden death of the plague of locusts, but that's part of the price we pay for letting sin build up for so long. It would also remind them how great and powerful is their God, like no other.

Joel lapses into rapture at the vision of God's favor. So sweet is this picture that he drifts off into visions of the Messianic Age. More than just what God could do for the Land if the people were faithful, revealing what a mighty God He is, but the people themselves would become a part of that revelation. Not just a few prophets and priests, but everyone and anyone could see His full power fall upon them. The earth and sky would convulse with rapture at the unspeakable joy of His full revealing. Then, the whole world would be welcomed into His Nation in Heaven.

Joel 3

While there are some literal references in this chapter, most of it is figurative or parabolic language. The imagery is established Hebrew symbolism, echoed in other prophetic works.

The Lord will judge all nations. Indeed, He does this almost daily, against the standard of the applicable Covenant of Noah. This is more a characterization of how God does things, so that any future singular event referenced is of a type. The Valley of Judgment – *Y'howshaphat* "Jehovah Judges" – should not be taken as a literal place, because no single land feature in Palestine fits all the references. Consider: There is no place large enough to contain all the nations. Rather, it reminds of the mighty victory of God against the enemies of Israel during the reign of Jehoshaphat, where the invaders slew each other (2 Chronicles 20). Again, this scene is a characterization of how God does things, judging the nations who persecute His people. That's because He takes it personally, as persecution of Himself.

At various times Judah's neighbors were known to sell portions of the Judean population as slaves, sometimes with a very conscious effort to ensure they would be taken too far away to reasonably ever return. It's not about the money, we can be sure. The idea is to destroy hope and faith, which is why God takes it personally. Joel notes several distinct cases. Sidon was captured and sold by Artaxerxes III of Persia. Alexander the Great sold slaves taken from Tyre and Gaza a short time later. Each of these cities had participated in enslaving Jews. The same promise of divine retaliation protects Christians today.

Then Joel reverses Isaiah's call to peace, with God calling the nations to turn their plows back into swords, and pruning hooks back into spears. It won't do them any good at all. When they appear before God for judgment, resistance to His justice means simply dying sooner and more painfully. This is followed by the image of nations standing ready to be harvested, as if all their best efforts still leave them no stronger than dry grass before the sickle, or grapes to be crushed. Again, Joel offers the symbol of a false reality destroyed. What man is so sure that he understands about ultimate truth will become utterly unreliable when standing before God, as if the heavenly bodies were snuffed out, and the earth itself will move like waves on the sea.

But those who are His will be taken into Paradise, and the New Earth will be like nothing anyone has seen on this earth. The enemies of faith will be dead and gone, forgotten. Instead, the Lord Himself will reign directly all who Live.

Introduction to Amos

Amos appears to have been a mere agronomy worker in the area directly south of Jerusalem, centered on the village of Tekoa, itself a few miles south and east of Bethlehem. Uzziah was king of Judah, and Jeroboam II in Samaria. His prophetic call was temporary, a particular message. That he was a Judean fussing with the Northern Kingdom simply adds flavor by way of political complications. It is critical that we understand God does not excuse anyone from holiness simply because of political concerns. Amos hiked up to Bethel, a day's journey. This was the nearest of the pagan temples raised up by Jeroboam I as a political move to prevent his people slipping from his authority. That is, he worried faithfulness to the authorized Temple in his rival's capital would cause his people to drift back into supporting David's heirs against him. God says that was no excuse, because during the split of the kingdom between Rehoboam and Jeroboam, He promised to support and to defend Jeroboam if he would remain faithful. The new king reneged on his promise to God. Jeroboam II continued this bogus policy, with golden calf images reminiscent of the idolatry at Mount Sinai.

Amos can be reasonably dated to about 751 BC, if we lend any credence to Josephus in dating that famously massive earthquake. He wrote that the earthquake came at the same time as Uzziah's leprosy. Both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms were fat and sassy, and insensitive to the Covenant obligations. Judah was bad enough, but Israel was just awful. Amos emphasizes the results of this lawlessness, in that the elite used any excuse to oppress the lower classes. Don't read modern political agendas back into this tribal society. God's Laws presume a literal blood kinship between all members of the nation, as well as a symbolic kinship as His

children. Nothing is more scandalous and shocking than betrayal of that bond, morally comparable to sexually abusing one's own children. Refusing to spread the wealth of God's material blessings, promised under the Covenant, to one's own blood kin is an unspeakable sickness. Amos highlights this as a symptom of drifting away from the moral purity of devotion to the God who made the nation from nothing.

Amos 1

Only Israel was subject to the Covenant of Moses. All other nations on this earth remain subject to Noah. This is revealed through the legacy of revelation God gave to Israel. Thus, Amos has standing to criticize all other nations based on God's Law of Noah for all humanity. The God of Israel is Lord of all creation, and His Laws remain applicable "while the earth remains" in the wording of the covenant itself (Genesis 8:22).

Amos comes out like gangbusters, firing condemnation in all directions for very real sins against Noah's Covenant. He projects the image of God rising up like a lion provoked by attack. A healthy lion's roar causes most creatures direct physical distress, weakening them. So it is that all life withers before God's wrath. Amos uses the refrain of "for three sins – make that four", not intending to offer a specific count, but is a Hebrew poetic device to show that the accused have yet to slow down from chasing evil.

Damascus never really wanted to invade Israel so much as dominate and plunder, and use the much larger nation as slaves and patsies for their schemes. Their depredations in Gilead were crimes of opportunity, invading only when they knew resistance would be weak. Then, instead of simply taking the plunder, they rubbed it in with ghastly torture of the survivors. This sort of spite always results in backlash, in this case the spiteful treatment by the invading Assyrians a mere two decades after Amos's prophecy. The surviving Syrians (Aramaeans) were exiled back to their homeland in Kir, somewhere in Mesopotamia. Amos notes God would simply let this backlash take its course.

The sins of the Philistines featured in Joel's prophecy, too. Taking war captives as slaves was not a crime in itself, but simply part of the spoils of war. Gaza was the lead city at this time of an invader presence God had permitted for moral failures of Israel during the Conquest. However, they were never grateful to Israel's God, but constantly taunted Him directly. Thus, it was selling their war captives to Israel's worst enemy, a symptom of their spite for Jehovah, which is the point here. Assyria was first to crush the Philistine cities, and then Alexander the Great did it again a few centuries later.

Tyre was no better. Indeed, they had a covenant with the House of David; Hiram called Solomon "brother" as a statement of legal obligations. Tyre abrogated that covenant in the foulest manner possible: They also sold Israeli villages as slaves to Edom. It's important to note that God's Laws take covenants as even more binding than blood ties. Covenants of peace and friendship are sworn solemnly before God, so Tyre provoked God directly. Tyre was ravaged during the same Assyrian invasion that destroyed Samaria, when the on shore portion of the city was destroyed and plundered, leaving only the island fortress standing. Again, Alexander the Great built his causeway and destroyed that fortress.

Edom is the easiest to understand in one sense, because of the ancient rivalry between the brothers Jacob and Esau. However, these two men took an Honorable path of separation. It was the descendants of Esau who took this beyond the pale. We can only understand their hatred by realizing that it was the very heart of satanic hatred for the truth and plan of God in revelation. Edom willingly personified that relentless hatred by how they treated Israel, utterly violating the most ancient taboo against fratricide. Edomites felt they lived solely to make any and all Israelis miserable. Edom had no peace from invading empires until John Hyrcanus forced them at the point of the sword to embrace Judaism and absorbed them into Judah.

The Ammonites were somewhat less closely related to Israel, arising from the sinful union of Lot and his daughters. We have passing mention that the Ammonites were warned sternly that God gave certain territory to Israel during the Conquest, and He would not permit them to take a finger's breadth of that land grant. Naturally, they wasted little time in poking God in the eye by invading Gilead on a regular basis. Yet again, had they limited their depredations to customary plunder, it would have been largely forgotten. But Ammon included the horrific crime of disemboweling pregnant women, something used ritually to call up demonic forces. Assyria ravaged the Ammonites with her favorite practice of exiling royalty and noble families. Succeeding invasions by other empires make Ammon disappear from history.

Notice how each of these prophecies points out violations of the most ancient taboos, laws which were commonly subscribed by all of humanity. Note also how the effects were demonic in character, attempting to squelch the revelation of God through His select nation. Each of these nations could easily have chosen to participate in that revelation by making peace with Israel, and receiving all the blessings offered in the Covenant of Noah, blessings reflected in detail in Moses.

Amos 2

Up to now we see Amos standing before the temple in Bethel, lowering the boom on the surrounding nations. I'm sure at this point he's gotten a sympathetic hearing. So he continues with Moab.

Moab held ground north of Edom, and south of Israel's holdings on the East Bank of the Jordan River. This nation arose from Lot's other son by incest. We don't know when they did it, but at some point Moab's troops raided the capitol of Edom and desecrated the royal graves. Removing the bones of one king, they burned them to lime. The primary crime here is perhaps one of the oldest recognized by humans everywhere, spiteful treatment of royal remains. At least one source indicates the resulting lime was used to plaster the Moabite palace. That palace was destroyed by Assyria, and the royal families were executed.

In our modern times we hardly comprehend how seriously God takes this sort of insult personally. We note that the Law of Moses forbade cremation, but that doesn't apply to Moab. Nor is it wrong to respectfully move bones in a land where burial space is very sparse. Israelis from ancient times would build tombs to accommodate a rotation of family members onto a single slab in a tomb, then moving the bones to a smaller space to free the slab for the next body. In this case, it's the spiteful desecration of those bones that is the crime here. Our casual

Western attitudes about human remains are an offense to God on the same grounds, and will contribute to His coming judgment upon us.

When Amos began to condemn his own people of Judah, I'm sure the folks listening in Bethel were all ears. Judah's sin was simply ignoring the Covenant. This would have brought a snicker, since Amos's audience probably had a bellyful of self-righteous condemnation from Judah. But it should have dawned on them what came next. While the doom on Judah was a loss of their proud palaces and even the Temple, it was still a long way off, whereas the doom on Israel was quite near.

That's because the condemnation on Israel was more generic than all of the preceding: senseless greed and the attendant violence. It was evil on a national level and personal level for all humanity. Like it or not, the God of Israel was still God, still holding them to the Covenant of Moses. There was ample warning in the Law how God took abuse of the poor personally. Aside from the Ancient Near Eastern customs of helping everyone, not just one's own blood kin, there were numerous prohibitions regarding subsistence loans that were not to be denied, plus the assurance God would repay when the poor could not. In other words, while outright charity might be embarrassing, absorbing such small losses were mandatory.

The wealthy were abusive in every way possible. They kept hocked clothing overnight, pointedly against the Law. They would reduce people to such poverty as to demand prostitution services, again breaking the Law by father and son using the same girl. They consumed luxury foods given in pledge against loans, in the sense of charging high interest rates, itself plainly illegal. These ungrateful wretches not only insisted they had survived the wilderness and conquered the land by their own strong hands, but forcibly violated the oaths of those who were pledged to serve Jehovah.

Having become such a burden of insult to His Name, God promised He would crush them with their own sins. As He had defeated their enemies in the past, He would now defeat Israel. Their mighty men would not even be able to deliver their own hides to safety, much less the kingdom.

Amos 3

Amos makes it clear that what follows is addressed to the entire nation of Israel, both kingdoms. The fundamental fact of Israel's existence is the Exodus. They proudly marched out from slavery, leaving the Nile Empire in ruins by the hand of God. No other nation ever received from God anything approaching this level of favor and attention. The language describes Israel as His Bride. But with this privilege comes a much higher burden of obedience. Of all nations, Israel alone truly understood what God required of all the other nations, with a yet higher standard for herself. Israel had *no* excuse for covenant failure.

Two parties cannot work together without an agreement, and Israel had defied her vows to God. Why did God send a prophet like Amos? Because her doom was upon her, just as a lion would roar only at the moment he springs upon his prey, and not a second before. Israel was like a bird that could not resist the bait of sin, and was already trapped. Normal people would

be stirred to action by a *shofar* sounding from the watchman on the wall, but Israel paid no heed. Do they not know the Lord Himself sends the enemy to attack?

God never moved among His people without the voice of a prophet explaining things. Just as the roar of a lion weakens the prey, so we would expect the people of Jehovah to quiver in fear at His thundering warning. The Lord invites the surrounding nations to come and watch from the mountains ringing the plain on which the Hill of Samaria stood. This beautiful valley would be strewn with carcasses and debris. The beautiful palaces and fine stone structures of this glorious city would be brought down.

It would be like a shepherd collecting the remains of his lamb after the lion had eaten his fill – a couple of hooves, maybe an ear. Just so, you would find near Samaria a piece of bed frame or the sheer curtain from one side of the canopy – so much for the luxurious trappings of life in Samaria. Did they take confidence in this temple in Bethel, where Amos stood to prophesy? It would fare no better; this was no temple of Jehovah! The stone walls of the palace would be pulled down, stripped clean of ivory tiles, and no noble mansion would survive.

Amos 4

Against the random misfortunes common to mankind in the vagaries of weather and such, the Covenant of Moses made specific promises. Faithfulness would find these random sorrows reduced, and fewer people would suffer want and disease, not to mention His promise of security against enemies. So the contrary was also clearly stated for those who ignored His Covenant, but even reason itself would indicate the troubles they did have meant they needed to correct some covenant failures. Instead, the upper classes simply refused to pay attention, and refused to reduce their consumption, placing an even greater burden on the poor.

Amos picks on the noble women as a significant factor driving this oppression. It was they who demanded their husbands actually increase the luxury when things weren't well in the kingdom. So Amos compares them to the fat cattle normally found in Bashan, the grassy plains east and north of the Sea of Galilee, using terms that indicate their day of slaughter was near. He mentions the fishhooks for which the Assyrians were infamous, literally leading noble and royal captives with hooks through the lip. The walls of Samaria would be so badly destroyed that everyone could exit the city straight out in any direction.

Samaria used their paganized ritual holidays for grandstanding and a general excuse to party. At this time, they were extravagant in their frequent observances, as if they could somehow claim holiness while stomping the peasants into the dirt. Amos sarcastically encourages them to keep it up; they love it so. Meanwhile, the utter emptiness of these rituals would result in empty mouths, teeth that were nice and clean from hunger.

Amos offers a list of natural clues of God's disfavor. The failure of latter rains essential to the harvest, spotty rain that meant insufficient water capture for cisterns, crop failures from various blights, and other types of plagues, such as they saw in Egypt during the Exodus. What does it take to show God is not with you? Even a few incidents like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah didn't seem to faze them. Trying to avoid God? You'll meet Him face to face, and

you won't like it! Better now to prepare in penitence. God knows you better than you know yourself.

Amos 5

The rulers in Samaria had lied to themselves so long that they could not imagine Jehovah's displeasure. The priests of the rival temples in Bethel and Gilgal had chopped out sections of the Pentateuch and made worship of Jehovah just like worship of Baal. For so many generations this had been the case that they regarded themselves as the true stewards of the revelation of God on Mount Sinai.

Israel was like a virgin, having never been fully conquered by any other nation. But she would soon be like a hooker prostrate in the street, unable to resist anything that came her way. Their troops would suffer a ninety percent casualty rate.

Amos warns it's not too late, if they turn away from the false worship at Gilgal, Bethel and other places. Even then, it's really a matter of sincerity before the Law, not simply the trappings. Jehovah was the God who made the entire universe, and nothing man could imagine would match His power. Samaria was an insult to this God, because they drove honest judges from the gates where people went for public court, and they crushed the peasants with endless measures of dishonesty. They loved injustice and its material gain; that was their true god.

Amos uses the ancient prophetic phrase, "the remnant." It conjures the image of God sparing some tiny portion of His Nation and raising them up to rule again in His name. But, no, they would not have it. So there will be trauma unspeakable as the kingdom is destroyed. These were the same people who made noise about praying for the Day of the Lord, as if they honestly believed it meant God would destroy their enemies. No, God will destroy *His* enemies, and now the Northern Kingdom was among those enemies of God.

So He warns them to stop the extensive and oh-so proper observance of their rituals. It will mean nothing in the Day of the Lord. What was it like during the Wilderness Wandering? Was it mere empty ritual in those days? Nobody wants to discuss the way they managed to keep their pagan images packed away in the baggage trains during the Exodus. God had not forgotten, and here they were even worse than ever. They would become captives far, far beyond any lands they knew, to a place they had perhaps only heard about.

Amos 6

As Amos was prophesying, Assyria was suffering a period of internal weakness. While several major fortress cities in the area lay in ruins from the days when Assyria was strong, the threat now seemed far away, and it appeared Babylon would rise up any day now and Assyria would collapse. So the royal and noble families in both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms had forgotten what God could do when His people sinned against the Covenant of Moses. Times had been rather tough on both kingdoms, but you'd never know it by the way the plutocrats lived, as we noted in previous chapters. Their self-assurance was far beyond what they could actually do.

Thus, Amos begins by warning the upper classes of both kingdoms against complacency. To say they were arrogant was an understatement. They would often remind the peasants how lucky they were to be ruled by such fine people, offering a comparison with surrounding smaller nations. So Amos reminds them that each of whose capital cities had suffered some in war. Not so with Samaria, of course. In their arrogance, the upper classes violently crushed the lower classes under heavy taxation, as if doing them a favor. But their days were numbered.

Amos draws with words an image of profligate luxury. Consuming all the best of everything in vast quantities, they wasted time in idle entertainments. They paid no attention to how the very infrastructure on which they relied was coming apart. Whatever passed for religious observance among them was just one more self-indulgence, and God swore by His own being that it would end. The Lord vowed to hand over Samaria and everything in it to the Assyrians. Little did they know, in just a few short years, a new ruler would arise, reinvigorating the Assyrian Empire with grand reforms that actually made a difference, and instituting a new policy of adding conscripts from all the conquered peoples. This meant an addition of more than one million infantrymen, and an equally massive cavalry force. Instead of a seasonal army, this one would fight year round. The rebellions plaguing Assyria would end very quickly, and her attention would be turned to the land west of the Upper Euphrates again.

The result would be that noble and royal houses, those few who escaped dying in battle, would die of plagues, instead. When relatives came to honor the dead with burning incense, the lone survivor in the house would beg them not to mention the name of God. This was an old superstition common in the paganized North, fearing the mention of God's Name after a plague would stir Him to come back after the victims He might have forgotten. Such a one would plead with mourners picking up the remains to avoid ritual chants.

Amos uses a common parable. Just as there are things we naturally don't do because it's common sense that they won't work, such as racing horses on rocky cliffs, or plowing the sea with oxen, so there is a moral sense that mankind should have about this world. If you transgress all the standards of justice, you invite evil into your very home. When you build a world where God cannot bless the little people because you take it all away, God will surely notice, and take it as a personal insult.

Proclaiming themselves so crafty, intelligent and powerful that they celebrate recovering ancient Israeli holdings from Syria, God warns it was all from His hand, not their human talents. A mighty empire would arise once again, and crush the entire nation, both kingdoms, from their very most northern borders in the past – the Gate of Hamath – to the very southernmost lands in the Arabah Valley, running down to the Gulf of Aqaba.

Amos 7

The Lord showed Amos two forms of punishment in the planning stages for the Northern Kingdom. The first was the hay crop devastated by a locust plague. Amos indicates the larvae were laid at the end of the early rains. By the time the grass was ready for its first cutting (the portion traditionally given to the royal household) the locusts would be preparing to move, and would devour the grass stalks so there would be no second crop after the latter rains. This

would be on the East Bank of the Jordan Valley, which was cattle country. As the locust plague moved west, it would devour other crops not yet ready to harvest. Amos pleaded with God for mercy, and the locusts were halted in the eastern heights so there could be a late season harvest of food in the rest of the land.

The second punishment is a symbol for drought, which would have destroyed much more than crops, but the very aquifers that fed all the springs. This would be more severe than a locust plague. However, the Lord then showed Amos an image of Himself holding a plumb line against a wall, signifying measuring Israel by the standards of the Covenant. How could the nation not collapse when everything God provided for stability was missing, and the nation's entire moral standing was sagging like a wall poorly built? There was no more sparing, no more "passover" for judgment. All the garbage in which they trusted would be crushed, and the royal house destroyed by the sword of Assyria.

Amaziah, the ranking priest at the Bethel temple, realized how this prophesying from Amos was affecting the folks visiting the shrine. Frankly, he was worried the traffic and offerings at the shrine would decline, as Amos would drive that traffic to the Temple God actually authorized on Zion. He accused Amos of being a mere fortune-teller. The priest accurately reported Amos' warnings to Jeroboam, perhaps hoping the king would take it as a threat. Meanwhile, Amaziah ordered Amos to make his living as a prophet in his own country, and stop leeching off of the temple offerings there in Bethel. Amos denied being a professional seer at all, just a humble agronomy worker. He was simply obeying God's command for a single short mission. He had no intention of continuing as a prophet, but would return to his work.

However, Amos offered to let his message be judged by the one standard of Israeli law, whether his predictions came true. Amos told Amaziah's fortune. He warned the priest his wife would be raped by the invading troops, his children slaughtered and his personal estate confiscated. The priest himself would be led away among the captive elite of the kingdom, and die in a pagan land far from home. If any of this didn't happen, Amos was no prophet.

Amos 8

When harvesting summer fruit, the last pickings are often overripe and just barely edible. To gather such fruit shows a sense of desperation or a peculiar greed, squeezing out the last few bits and pieces. The vision God showed Amos is this kind of fruit. It's the attitude of those who rule the Northern Kingdom, to squeeze the poor for all they can get, because they are themselves in morally desperate straights.

The time for that last harvest has come. Note the divine sense of time is much longer than ours, as the prophecy comes true almost thirty years later. Meanwhile, the merchants and the rulers are the same people, and the kingdom policy is to plunder the poor. So they chafe at any religious festival that suspends commerce, and they get away with fraudulent trade practices, as if it delights them.

This sort of pervasive moral evil has flooded the land like the Nile does Egypt. So deeply is God offended that He would cause the same signs over Samaria as He did over Egypt during the Exodus, such as darkness at midday and the loss of firstborn sons. This warning from Amos

could well be the last word from God through any prophet, as He would take away all further prophecy. Even the strongest souls would decline into moral corruption, because the truth could not be found, even if they searched for it.

Not that they would miss it. Amos notes at various times in her history, the Northern Kingdom had built rival temples at Dan, shrines in Samaria itself, along with those at Bethel where Amos had prophesied and Gilgal. Even the inhabitants at Beersheba got in on this madness, so it stretched between the two extreme border cities “from Dan to Beersheba.” All these would be destroyed and plundered, never again to rise as shrines to any pagan idols.

Amos 9

When the Day of the Lord comes, nothing remains the same. His wrath falls upon sin and destroys it, along with all sinners who cling to it. His grace and mercy build up those who seek His glory.

The final vision for the Northern Kingdom is God Himself standing inside the paganized temple at Bethel. His Name was called there in vain, but when He does appear, it is for wrath upon those who rejected His Covenant. Whether Samaria liked it or not, the Covenant of Moses as originally published applied to them. Having defiled it with these temples, merely a sharp political move, those who worship there would not survive. The Lord speaks to His own wrath, commanding that the temple be knocked down on the heads of those who worshiped there. The sword would take the few who escaped. No matter where they flee in this world or other realms, there is no place where God would fail to pursue them.

Samaria had forsaken not merely their peculiar national deity, but this is the very Creator of all things. The earth cannot bear His Presence, and Heaven can hardly contain Him. The Northern Kingdom had made itself so pagan that they were no different in God’s sight than the most remote Gentiles of the earth. He who called the nations to move here and there upon the face of the earth could as easily wipe them off the earth. So the sinners of Israel would be destroyed, but the mission of Israel would remain, taken up by a righteous remnant, whose population would be swelled from among the Gentile nations of the earth.

All nations would be sifted as grain, and nothing fruitful would be lost. Those who trust in their own wisdom and talents would be destroyed. The Samaritans took what Amos says next as mere political statement, but he’s not talking about some mere earthly kingdom of David. He prophesies that the Lord would build a new Kingdom of the Spirit, a Messianic promise of the future Davidic Realm in the hearts of men. It would be everyone from the human race who embraces this Messiah. What the Law had symbolized in earthly terms was a divine blessing on Life in the Spirit, an outpouring of richness too great to measure. No one will be able to take them from that spiritual land of Eternity.

Introduction to Obadiah

We have no idea who the prophet Obadiah was. We cannot match him to any other Obadiah who appears in the historical narratives. Nor can we precisely determine his dates, because

there are four similar events that match what he condemns in his prophecy. Edom's final perfidy was during the Babylonian conquest and destruction of Jerusalem. Of course, Babylon turned on Edom a few years later.

What matters most is the message itself. One of the most ancient customs among humans has been the utter necessity of treating blood kin somewhat better, with much greater forgiveness and flexibility than other humans. Granted, when someone makes themselves your enemy, it won't matter if it's your brother. Still, Jacob took nothing Esau didn't throw away. Nor did it matter how he got it, because God Himself revealed that Jacob was the chosen, so Esau had the obligation to step aside. Instead, Esau's descendants treated Jacob's with a particularly raw and bitter hatred above all other nations on the earth. In other words, only God's patience prevented Him wiping Edom from human memory until very late in the game, when He was about ready to remove Israel from her favored position once and for all.

Christ closed the Covenant of Moses. Just a century or so before His birth, what was left of Israel absorbed the Edomites. The Edomite King Herod, having married into the Judean royal family, usurped the throne by killing all rivals. His sons are the last known Edomite blood in history, disappearing when Rome finally crushed Jewish revolts.

Obadiah

As always, we must recognize a significant portion of the text is parabolic. Yet parts of it we can recognize in literal events in history. Most importantly is the clear lesson of how God judges the nations impartially, even when the victim is Israel. Had Edom simply remained aloof from her cousins, she would have suffered precious little. Instead, her bitter war against God's revealed purpose and will was a war against God Himself. We are hardly surprised so much of this is typical of God's wrath: The exact kind of evil she brought against Israel was magnified upon her own head.

The literary format is a bill of accusation presented in a law court. The Judge is Jehovah, of course. It is He who sent an angelic runner to announce His sentence against Edom, in which all nations should rise up together against her, no one as her ally or protector. Meanwhile, the Judge lectures the defendant.

Edom was known for unspeakable arrogance, trusting in how difficult it was to approach the capital city. The narrow gorge was the only entrance, and there was precious little room to assemble troops in front of the city. No matter, because God Himself was answering her bold challenge. Could the city even fly in the sky, it would not escape His wrath. Were it merely robbers or crop raiders, they would take only what they could easily carry. God would send assaults capable of invading the secret treasuries, leaving nothing. Everyone who had ever been allied would betray them, even while Edom's food bribes were in their mouths. Her wisest men would become fools, and her most depraved soldiers would fear.

What were her crimes? In the ancient world, blood ties were a major element in God's Laws. By His command, all governments were supposed to be blood relations to those they governed. This remains today the single strongest tie between humans in their fallen state. However bad a tribal government could be, it could not possibly be as bad as every other form of government

man has dreamed up since then. It was God Himself who declared that no one should have significant rule in your daily life that isn't related to you by blood or covenant. So it should surprise no one that the Lord takes particular offense when blood kin are set against each other. Esau was Jacob's brother; their descendants in the nations of Edom and Israel were blood relations, holding shared DNA. God would not permit Israel to harm Edom, but Edom couldn't wait to do anything, small or great, against Israel.

Every time any power rose up to invade Jerusalem, to take plunder and captives, Edom begged – even offered bribes – for the opportunity to participate as her enemy. It was not for the profit, but the sheer and unspeakable spite. This destroyed the fundamental boundaries between nations in God's Laws. Even when the invaders were hostile to Edom as well, she would volunteer to cut off escape routes for any part of Israel. They dared to drink celebratory toasts to their pagan deities in the very Temple grounds.

Thus, Edom would be driven from her home, so that foreign invaders toast their gods against Edom's losses until the earth was removed. We know during the early part of the Restoration when some tiny remnant of Judah had returned to Jerusalem from Exile, that Arab tribes invaded Edom's territory. Arabs subjugated Edom completely as slaves and peasants on their own ancient homeland. A couple of centuries later, the Nabateans invaded and drove all of them out. A tiny remnant of Edomites occupied the Negev and portions of southern Judah, only to be subjugated by John Hyrcanus. They were finally absorbed into Judah and disappeared from history before the Romans broke the final Jewish revolt.

Meanwhile, when Messiah comes and brings the New Israel, no one will remember Edom, or any other enemy of the old Israel. The symbolism of the revived Davidic Kingdom against the hopeless end of the Edomites is God rubbing it into her face.

Introduction to Jonah

Jonah is well established historically. He hails from Gath-hepher, a hilltop village near Nazareth, up in Zebulun's tribal territory. Does any prophet arise from Galilee? Jonah was one. He appeared as prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II, somewhere between 780 and 750 BC. His ministry intertwines with that of Amos, and in many ways he succeeds Elisha as a statesman prophet.

We see the hand of God building and crushing human political aspirations and accomplishments, sometimes using His servants directly, sometimes less so. That He both raises up, and then punishes kingdoms and empires is often difficult to understand, and we have at best a series of snapshots and some educated guesses how these things work. We know God has revealed His wrath on wanton violence and greed in governments, but still uses those governments in His plans.

Once the Davidic Kingdom was split, the Lord raised up Assyria, among others, to reduce the land holdings of both Judah and Israel. Early in his ministry, Jonah received the call to prophesy in Nineveh. It was more than simple racism against Gentiles, but patriotism to resist the call,

since it would prolong the stability of his people's greatest foe. His mission successful, he understood from God the temporary holiness of Nineveh would reduce their lust for conquest, allowing both Judah and Israel to reclaim most of their former territories (2 Kings 14:23ff). However, this led to Jeroboam's false impression that Jehovah favored his reign as it was. When Amos came later and declared it not so, Jeroboam was not ready to hear. We should not assume Jonah had failed to say the same things to his king and the ruling class as a whole. Eventually the effects of Jonah's ministry wore off in Nineveh, and the Assyrian empire rose to violence again, and returned to crush the Northern Kingdom.

Jonah 1

Let us first endeavor in our minds to remove all the senseless embellishments added to this very popular story. The Lord created a period of widespread major instability and weakness across the entire Middle East during the reign of David, which was very favorable to Israel. When the kingdom was split between Rehoboam and Jeroboam, the Assyrians had already arisen from that period of chaos as the biggest imperial power in the region. While there were plenty of other actors involved, the Assyrian domination led to significant losses in territory for both Judah and Israel. However, very quickly Assyria's internal moral rot was taking its toll. It's not as if the Laws of Noah were unknown to the scholars of the Mesopotamian Valley, but even pagan religious traditions condemned the moral depravity of Assyria. In the Courts of Jehovah, the case against Assyria was compelling, and He was about ready to unleash His wrath on her.

With Israel having already sent delegations with tribute to Assyria in the past, her capital at Nineveh was well known to the Hebrew people, at least from the reports of her emissaries. Jonah knew Assyria was in decline, and was earnestly hoping to hear news of some grievous destruction striking Nineveh. The Lord decided He still had use for Assyria, and commanded Jonah to go and prophesy to them. It is quite probable the Lord intended that Jonah join the next tribute mission traveling there. Since only the Nation of Israel was under Moses, Jonah would have preached repentance under the Covenant of Noah, already part of the cultural lore of Assyria, if not in name, then in substance. Jonah refused this mission.

From wherever he was, likely near his hometown of Gath-hepher, he hiked a considerable distance, not less than some three days' journey, to the port city of Joppa. Given the Hebrews were not a seafaring people, Jonah took passage on a ship crewed by men from several other nations. Their destination was somewhere far away to the west. The name "Tarshish" is highly ambiguous, but what we do know is the name meant pretty far away. It was also in the opposite direction of Nineveh.

Jonah went down and slept in the lower deck against the hull, with the cargo. The Lord sent a stormy wind. The pagan sailors regarded it a duty of all aboard to pray to their deities of choice to save the ship. Meanwhile, they tossed all the cargo overboard and found Jonah sleeping in the bottom. Jonah was ordered to add his prayers to theirs, hoping one of the souls on board would appease whomever was causing the storm. As a part of their common rituals, they cast lots to see if anyone needed to confess some sin, and perhaps which god would deserve their joint attention. Jehovah being in charge, He ensured the lot fell to Jonah. Their questions were

typical of their assumptions about such things. Jonah answered that his God was Jehovah, maker of all things.

You'll notice they didn't get into a dispute about whether such audacious claims of Jonah's God were accurate, because holding competing claims of this sort in tension was a part of their intellectual background. Rather, it was more a warning how serious was the threat to them, since they had surely heard about the Exodus and Conquest. As the only one who served Jehovah, Jonah would surely know what was necessary to appease Him. There was no escape, and Jonah told them to toss him overboard. They weren't happy with that idea, and in their delay things got much worse. So they took him at his word and prayed Jehovah would hold them innocent of sin in this matter. As soon as Jonah was in the water, everything calmed down, and they all added Jehovah to their personal pantheon of gods that must be taken seriously.

The Hebrew culture paid only the faintest attention to seafaring matters. Thus, the terminology is, at best, imprecise when it already tends to symbolism in the first place. Something big swimming in the water swallowed Jonah. Somehow, he survived in that state for several days. The narrative gives us no clue what mechanism God might have used for this miracle, only that God was not through with Jonah, as His chosen instrument to give Assyria a little more time.

Jonah 2

We can imagine Jonah inside whatever creature God prepared for this occasion, slipping in and out of consciousness for something like 72 hours. Even with all the miraculous provisions, this must have been incredibly unpleasant.

What we have here is a hymn of thanks marking this event, composed afterward. It follows typical Hebrew poetic expression, loaded with symbolism. In essence, Jonah was pretty sure he was going to die, and knew he deserved this most sorrowful end. There is nothing here of negotiating, but repentance and submission. Jonah promised, should the Lord relent, he would be faithful and obedient. Otherwise, this was surely his just end for defiance.

Nor is it totally out of the question Jonah did die. It would not be the first time God resuscitated one of His servants. What we are sure of is that Jonah was indigestible to this creature.

When Jonah was fully broken, the Lord directed the swimmer to discharge its passenger. Notice the Hebrew explicitly says Jonah did not have to swim ashore. He was vomited directly up onto dry ground. There is no reason to suppose this was anywhere far from Joppa, whence Jonah sought to flee. The poetic justice of Hebrew thinking would predict Jonah found himself right where he left off. He still had a hard three days' hike home, probably passing through Jerusalem and stopping at the Temple to fulfill his vows, on the way home.

Jonah 3

The narrative indicates God wasted no time in renewing His call to Jonah. Without delay, Jonah was to proceed directly to Nineveh and proclaim God's doom on them.

In our modern Western vernacular, the word “city” conjures the image of a dense urban congregation of tall buildings and vast acreages of pavement, surrounded closely by suburbs and outlying industrial and other service structures. In ancient times, it would have been wholly different. A city would be a rather small and dense urban build-up, surrounded with a good bit of agricultural property to feed the residents. Farther out would be any number of smaller cities, towns and villages to house people and activities that supported the central city. To visit a particular great city in ancient times could refer to any part of the entire vast area that supported the actual city itself.

Jonah made his way to the imperial capital. In ancient times, it’s all but inconceivable that someone would actually hike the major trade routes 800 miles (1300km) alone. The very idea of any trip more than a few days’ walk would mean joining a caravan at the least, or traveling with a small entourage if you had the resources to pay an armed guard and ride animals. We are looking at no less than one month if one pursued a breakneck pace on fast onagers or horses across the ancient terrain. We can assume Jonah had at least a servant and probably some friends along for the journey, but probably traveling as light as possible. We should expect it would take easily two or three months.

On his first day working through Nineveh’s suburbs, Jonah begins to proclaim his warning. The term “forty days” was seldom meant literally. Such precision was foreign to Ancient Near Eastern cultures. As it was, with the pace of life so much slower than we can imagine today, it was still a doom impending all too closely. We know during this time Nineveh had suffered several events that people in those days would have taken as portents and omens, including famines and celestial signs. It’s not hard to imagine they were primed for such a message of doom, but more importantly, God was working through His own message to bring a powerful sense of fear. Messengers made sure the rulers knew that first day.

Nothing in the imperial edict recorded here is unusual. Assyrian imperial records indicate similar edicts. These plus other contemporary records indicate that Assyrians were particularly cruel and violent, and were proud of it at times. The ritual acts of penitence were common to that entire region of the world back then. Provoking domestic animals to moan about thirst and hunger was considered proper for placating angry deities. The noise would have been incredible, with all normal activity suspended. We are told God did, indeed, relent. The city was saved.

Jonah 4

With some rare exceptions, a prophetic word from God is conditional, typically a call for repentance. Rare is the prophet who isn’t thrilled to see his audience take the warning seriously, but Jonah hated his audience in the first place. Again, this was a combination of the oppression and cruelty of the imperial government in dealing with Jonah’s people, plus we now see a rather strong element of racism. Jonah preferred to see all God’s blessings for only the Nation of Israel. So Jonah groused at God for being so merciful, of all things. He begged God permission to die, since his obedience would surely bring more trouble on his homeland. God asked Jonah if this attitude was really appropriate.

Nineveh stood on the eastern bank of the Tigris in what is today northern Iraq, opposite modern Mosul. To the east of this area can be found any number of little high spots where a fellow might camp out and view the flat river plain below. For this purpose, the narrative mentions Jonah (and whoever was with him) built a booth, a light frame with vegetation for cover. It was the most common temporary shelter aside from tents. Jonah's purpose was to watch for sure whether their repentance was sufficient to escape God's wrath. His foul mood would be no match for God, though.

During this stay, however long it was, a large shading plant, which we believe was a Castor bean plant, grew up to reinforce the limited shade offered by the shelter. This brightened Jonah's mood somewhat, given the sparseness of vegetation in that area. A Castor bean plant can be quite large with broad overlapping leaves, and would have made a substantial shelter by itself. They are also vulnerable to worms, and we are told that one killed this extra shade Jonah had enjoyed. That same day, an eastern wind began to blow. Any such wind in that part of the world would be blistering hot and dry. Jonah suffered miserably and was once more ready to die.

In his truculence, Jonah seemed hardly careful in answering God. The prophet insisted he had every right to be angry with God in these difficult circumstances, for both the salvation of his enemies and the nasty discomfort. God had commanded him to do something utterly abhorrent and unpatriotic, forced him into doing so when he tried to flee, and now the worst of all outcomes stood before him as the city repented. Topping it all off was a blistering wind and his last bit of comfort in this world was gone. God spoke again and reminded Jonah he had felt protective of a simple piece of seasonal greenery.

Having invested nothing in the plant, why should Jonah care about its short life span? In this fallen world, such flora is simply random background scenery. Nothing justifies strong feelings about it either way. People? That's another matter. Sure, in the vagaries of life in the broader pagan world, empires come and go. Israel had the revelation of God; His personal attention and blessings were never offered to any other people anywhere on the planet, past or future. And what good did it do Israel? Here was a city with more than a hundred thousand souls without any such revelation from God, and they were repenting with such ardor, it should embarrass any Israelite. Jonah was rooting for the wrong side, because God could hardly claim to be on the side of the Northern Kingdom after centuries of ignoring His Word. Instead, every prophet should be glad to rejoice with anyone on this earth who embraces however much of God's Laws they can grasp.

Introduction to Micah

The Eighth Century BC was a very busy time for prophetic ministry. From prophets noted above, we learn that Samaria had reached the peak of her evil and was destroyed in 722 BC. Yet some of the same wicked practices and accompanying arrogance had taken root in Jerusalem. We learn later, from Jeremiah that the full name is Michaiiah, and he hailed from Moresheth, a small town on the Philistine border southwest of Jerusalem. He was acquainted with Isaiah,

writing with the same grand Hebrew literacy, and with Amos, who shared his rustic background. He places himself in the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah of Judah, starting roughly 740 BC, perhaps running as late as 690 BC.

Micah's calling was to address the very deeply rooted evil of the whole nation, readily apparent in declining social morality. While the finger of God's justice still pointed at the ruling classes, Micah witnessed to the effects on the common people. The leadership had forgotten these folks were family, too, ripping gaping holes in the moral fabric of God's Creation.

Micah 1

After briefly introducing himself and his ministry, Micah proceeds directly with his first vision. He draws an image of God as ruler of all Creation, sitting on His throne, not so much the symbolic throne in Jerusalem's Temple, but the divine Throne of Heaven. Something demands His attention, and He intends to visit some portion of His realm. It's not good news; He comes in wrath.

Reading this poetry requires a sharp mind, as Micah snatches up dual meanings every step of the way. God comes down in wrath upon the high places, both as pagan shrines and as simply those parts of the earth God encounters first if we imagine Him falling like thunder upon victims. His mere presence could ruin the earth, and in seconds He could alter forever the topography of the land. But the point of His visit is that the sins of Samaria are piled so high that it covers everything rather like the Flood of Noah. Not that Jerusalem is so much better, particularly during the reign of Ahaz, who dared revive the worship of Molech and other disgusting Canaanite deities, along with several new ones from who knows where.

We are regaled with colorful images. The massive stonework and beauty of Samaria will become rubble at the foot her hill, such that one could easily plant a vineyard. The top of the high ground will be just a collection of bare foundations. All the treasures, particularly the incredibly high investment in the richly decorated pagan idols, would be wiped from human memory. Since Samaria has been so utterly unfaithful to her Lord, her wealth would be forgotten like some grand harlot whose home burned to the ground – so much for the wages of sin. You can gain so very much in such a short time, but you can't keep it. God may take His sweet time as humans measure such things, but His justice is sure and extreme.

It was time for Micah to strip naked as one whose sorrow is so deep he can only express it by the most shocking social behavior. What does it matter to those near him there in the Southern Kingdom? It's the same sins infesting Jerusalem, and the destruction would not leave his hometown untouched. Indeed, when Assyria began the campaign by destroying Samaria, she continued by taking every city in Judah as well, with the exception of Lachish and Jerusalem, saved by a miracle. The siege and destruction came to the very gates of Zion, though.

In a series of clever puns and mental associations, Micah catches our attention. Don't let the Philistines in *Gath* ("Wine Press" as a place of celebration) think they can celebrate this bad news, because they would be crushed by Assyria, too. Those in *Beth Aphra* ("House of Dust") will roll in the dust, a ritual act of sorrow. Let the folks in *Saphir* ("Beauty") cover their nakedness in shame, no longer so proud. *Zaanana* (sounds like "depart") can't leave. Those in

Beth Ezel ("House of Separation") will be separated from God's protective Presence. People in *Maroth* ("Bitter Springs") were hoping for sweetness, but the bitterness of God's wrath came to very gate of Jerusalem. *Lachish* (sounding very close to "swift steed") will need to break out by chariot. This was the first southern city to break out of God's holiness by adopting the sins of Jeroboam in Samaria.

But there's more. Jerusalem will say goodbye (literally, give a parting gift, a possession) to the *Moreseth* ("Possession") of Gath. *Achzib* ("Deception") will deceive and turn traitor to their rulers in Israel. *Mareshah* was a personal possession, inherited by whoever was tribal chief of Judah, but the only heir coming to take possession would be the heir of the Assyrian throne. Meanwhile, the famous caves of *Abdullam* ("Refuge") will see the "glory of Israel" – nobility in their battle finery – come cowering to hide.

Instead of widening one's tent with extra sections for a growing family with young children, the people of Israel and Judah would spread out their baldness as a sign of mourning and loss. Those children would be taken away as captives, the noble sons born in luxury to become the lowest slaves in the Assyrian palaces.

Micah 2

We note in passing that this chapter has proved quite difficult to follow at times, and commentaries vary widely on what to make of it. However, some things seem rather obvious. We see the life cycle of human government, even among the Chosen People of Jehovah, always ends with a highly sophisticated and calculating plot to rob their very own.

Micah begins the chapter by describing how the rulers of the whole nation set about weakening the peasantry. Regulations hemmed them in, forcing them into a weaker position against the more wealthy and favored merchants. The elites created monopolies and jacked up prices far beyond any semblance of market value. Predatory lending was carefully designed as a cover for plans to confiscate property. In every way, they sought to frustrate the promises of God under His Laws, doing everything in their power to nullify His blessings. God counts this the same as declaring war on His people, over whom He had made them rulers. It was the ultimate perversion of their privileged role, an ungrateful slap in God's face.

God's response was to note that, while they may well succeed in devouring the flock of God, their own fate would be worse. Their schemes would pale in comparison to God's brilliant plans for them. Those living in grinding poverty and oppression would find Assyrian captivity a relief, but the nobility and royalty would become slaves. The oppressed would mock them with a sarcastic lament of how all that stolen inheritance of land was divided among the Assyrian nobles. They would lament, "What we have stolen has been stolen from us!" When God was through, the ruling class would be utterly erased from the Covenant.

These rulers had the arrogance to demand prophets such as Micah pipe down, to keep impassioned pleas for justice out of their ears. They got all huffy and proposed rules and laws to silence such prophets, as if it were somehow undignified. They repeat the mantra about how Jehovah is so long-suffering and patient, quoting the words out of context, and that the prophets shouldn't be so judgmental. So the Lord answers how cherry picking through His promises and

ignoring the curses in the Covenant is intellectually dishonest. The promises apply only to those who embrace the whole Law of God, but the ruling class was in flagrant violation of the most basic and obvious commands. How easy it is to forget that His Laws require a fundamental justice that favors the weakest. These rulers were tossing single mothers out on the street on the flimsiest pretense of greedy perversions of His Laws. Ignoring the moral boundaries results in God removing His powerful hand of protection from their political boundaries. Their sin was an open invitation for invasion. On the other hand, if some smooth talking seer came along and prophesied of good times and easy luxury, they would throw their money at him, promoting him as the voice of Heaven. But that would be the voice of someone other than Jehovah.

The real God of Heaven and Earth did not act as they. Somewhere in the far future, He would call and gather the scattered remnants of His People. As with all such prophecies, we correctly see this on two levels. Those of the Northern Kingdom walking in faith did eventually come sneaking back home to live in Judah, and the Lord protected them. We have no idea how many escaped the Assyrian exile, but it was significant. Those lacking any commitment to the Covenant would have no reason to return. But we know on another level, the Lord would eventually open His Kingdom in Heaven to all humanity, and make of them the New Israel. So Micah contrasts how God operates against the rulers of both Samaria and Jerusalem.

Micah 3

A predator will eventually get his fill and rest, but the mouth of Hell opens onto a bottomless pit. Micah warns that the leadership of the entire nation was more inspired by demonic powers than any spirit of justice. The fundamental theme: Everything the leadership does is colored by corruption. Every part of the ruling class is for sale.

The ruling class had a divine imperative to understand God's justice. Everything they did was perverted, a twisted mockery of good and justice. To them, the people they ruled were so much cattle and sheep, existing only for the feeding of those who ruled. When the day of trouble comes, and the rulers cry to God, He won't be able to hear them for the cacophony of their sins.

The prophets were no better, and would be more useful dead. So long as their bellies were full, they claimed everything was fine with God. Fail to cater to their whims and you would hear that God is angry at the whole world. In other words, their spirits were already dead, incapable of hearing from the Lord. The only god giving them any message was the god of their own appetites. So when the day comes that they were desperate to hear from God, there would be only silence for a message, and darkness for insight. If they rolled the dice, they would never get the same numbers twice.

Micah was as full as they were empty. He had boldness from a commitment to God's justice, and could speak a word from God by reflex. No need for mumbo jumbo and divination to figure out what the single greatest problem was: Israel was in open defiance of the entire Covenant. So even Jerusalem itself was built from violence, blood mixed liberally in the mortar between the stones. It required a bribe just to walk down the street.

Meanwhile, they were just so sure nothing could happen to them because they lived in the city where God's House stood. He had found the place too foul to stay around. Because of them, the

city would be a heap of ruins, with a plowed field replacing the vast pavements. God would bring invaders to tear down His own House because it was unbearable to Him.

Micah 4

Truth resides in Heaven, which truth bears implications for our world below. What would the world be like if men obeyed that truth? Micah reveals a vision of Heaven manifested on earth. The imagery symbolizes what could be, a future that cannot be literal. Though we know mankind will never go this way, the imagery serves to describe something of how it is to walk with the Messiah while still here. We taste the power of God to set things right, and know it will someday be realized in some fashion. We belong to the truth, and it belongs to us, because we belong to Heaven.

Imagine a world where Zion was what it could have been, a place of genuine truth inhabited by people who understood the full implications of the Laws of God, who understood that it was all symbolized a higher reality. It would feel as if Zion were the landmark of all humanity, drawing them like a magnet of desire for truth. The spiritual nation of Israel would be a living, breathing revelation of God's ideals, by their very existence teaching His Word.

The real Presence of God among such people would make painfully obvious what is just to all mankind. Nations would recognize what was required for good living, and embrace it. There would no longer be any need to produce and keep weapons for defending against invasion. Instead, they could retool those weapons, devoting precious resources to peace and prosperity. Everyone will be secure as undisputed owner of the property he holds. Imagine how low taxation would be! This is what could have been if Israel had caught the fire, the vision of what God wanted to offer them.

But we can be like this in our hearts already. We can walk in this lifestyle even now. We know the world will never honor Our God, but we can follow Him regardless. In Christ, He has drawn us from all nations, we who were broken and battered by sin and wrath. In our repentance we found Him and He has made us into a new nation, a New Israel living in the New Zion of the heart. The Lord Himself would rule from there as our Shepherd King, the Messiah.

It was a sad contrast to this that Micah saw in his day. It was as if there were no king, so lawless was Judah. Their sins roared like an angry mob out of control, and God's wrath brought pain worse than a woman in childbirth. Here, while everyone worries about Assyria, it will be Babylon who carries them off into exile. Surely He would eventually redeem them from there.

Because of Israel's sin, the world beat a path to her doors, not to learn but to cry out in lust to rape the city. Still, their end is unspeakable destruction, while God will surely raise up this New Israel to plunder the nations. When she rises up to claim the souls for Messiah, no power on earth can resist. They do not realize how ripe they are for threshing. The precious souls of the redeemed will be presented as rich offerings to the Lord.

How sad it is when people read these words and demand a literal fulfillment, utterly missing the greatest opportunity in human history.

Micah 5

We cannot guess what Micah knew in our modern terms of knowing about his own prophetic message. He wove a tapestry of truth in a language and culture that blended literal and symbolic together because the burden was on the reader to come with a heart open to the Spirit of God. We must be careful not to read too much of one, or too little of the other, into his message.

This chapter opens during the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem. Micah warns that the king will be struck by a symbol of another's authority, a symbolic act of dominance over the kingdom. While Assyria did not do so herself, it was Babylon a short time later who did. The point is that things aren't looking good for those now living in Jerusalem so deeply embroiled in idolatry. Bringing the field troops inside the gates signifies an expectation that the walls will breach any moment.

In the midst of this fearful moment, Micah turns to mention a clan so insignificant that everyone was surprised when Samuel anointed one of the men as successor to King Saul. He was already ancient history at the time Micah wrote, but David was a symbol of the coming Messiah. Thus, Jewish scholars knew Micah alone among the prophets named Messiah's birthplace. He would be even more ancient than David in the truth He bore. This promise stands in contrast to the current siege. Eventually the people would be taken into exile and live under pagan rulers for a time. But there would be a day of return, when the nation would be reunited under this Messiah.

It would have been the promise for Israel to claim, but she would not have it. God's promises cannot be frustrated, though. When He rises to claim His divine throne, the Messiah will lead a New Israel. His name would be known throughout the world, and nothing could harm His domain, because His reign was in the hearts of people. So it won't matter who thinks to invade His kingdom; they won't be able to touch it. Instead, those who seek to crush His truth will be crushed by it. As many leaders as it takes, so many will Our Lord raise up to shepherd with Him in the ferocity and effectiveness of David, but in terms of the Spirit. To the very home of the first human empire, they would be able to dominate on Christ's behalf with His truth.

This new Kingdom, "survivors of Jacob," would be found among every people of the world. It would seem they just fall from the sky like the dew that no man can prevent. They will be like a lion among the flocks of sheep, seizing whomever they see without any hope of stopping them. The powers of men cannot avail against the onslaught of the gospel message.

When the Day of the Lord comes, sin is destroyed. Micah symbolizes it as the cavalry forces Judah had gathered to match her neighbors, in violation of the Covenant. In ancient times, horses were always dedicated to pagan gods, and the Lord commanded that Israel should always only have infantry, but with such they would always defeat any foe when they relied on Him. All those mighty fortresses symbolized a commitment to the ground, not to the truth that should have been in the lives of the people themselves. They could have remained in tents eternally and God would have prospered and defended them. For sure, the idols and pagan practices would be destroyed.

The last line in the chapter is a reminder that God judges all nations of humanity, and all the people in those nations.

Micah 6

The mission of Israel was to be a living receptacle for the revelation of God to a fallen world. God built them up from nothing into a mighty nation, but their very existence was by trust in God, sufficient trust to obey Moses' Law even when it didn't make sense to them on a human level. By living the Law, they released God's mighty blessings for miracles incomprehensible. By the time of Micah, they had already compromised on far too many issues, and no longer possessed a glimmer of vision for the wonders of serving Jehovah.

So with Micah standing as witness and prosecutor, and the mountains (as a proxy for Creation itself, with its ancient memories) sitting as jury, the Lord presses His case against Israel. Of course, Israel has no defense, so the Lord proceeds with His arguments. How much does it take to prove His generosity? How many miracles must He offer them before they accept His demand that they worship and serve Him according to the Covenant? Had any other nation experienced so much as the Exodus, the deliverance from Moab's attempt to curse, the dry crossing of the Jordan to Gilgal, they would have never dreamed of cheating on such a God.

Let's assume an honest seeker, even from one of those other nations. Such a one would ask how much it costs to make a fit offering to Jehovah. Should he do all the grandstanding done by kings and nobles in Judah? Would it be as the filthy religion of Molech, even then reintroduced in Judah? Hardly; God owns all the resources in the world, but the one thing the Law says we can actually give Him is our commitment to walk in His justice, to be steadfast in loving the rather tame and sensible requirements of obeying God's commands. You are the one who benefits from all this. Is anyone paying attention to this simple message? God never ceases calling out to His people.

But He won't wink at your corrupt practices. He's keeping a very full and detailed account of your unjust gain, and all the ways you cheat your neighbors. Nor can He ignore the reflexive violence of the wealthy ruling class, who can hardly be described as "noble." Those who ignore His commands to any degree will face His wrath. It won't matter how much you have, because you won't enjoy it. Even if you manage to hang onto all your worldly gains from predation, God will send someone to rob you. They won't leave so much as the herbs in your window boxes. Ever try extracting oil from olives by stomping like grapes? It does no good to the olives or your feet, and produces no significant oil. How about squishing grapes between your fingers? So is the depth of your commitment to God's ideals. Abundant oil and wine symbolize the joy of serving God, a heart overflowing with peace. Instead, you ape the Northern Kingdom in the worst of their idolatries.

The utter destruction of God's wrath will leave Jerusalem a stinking ruin that people will avoid.

Micah 7

The Lord planted the seed of His revelation in the soil of Abraham's children. It sprouted, bore fruit some seasons, and then began to wither and offered nothing. The fruit of the Law is an upright and just life as God measures such things, and the blessings that attach to such a life.

Micah finds the situation very depressing. It's as if the summer has come and gone, and somehow there was never any fruit on the Tree of Israel. There is no moral restraint at all in the land. Try to find a prophetic watchman, but no one pays attention, so it does no good to warn the people of coming doom. You cannot trust anyone, not even your spouse, or any of your blood kin. But Micah can do no other than watch for the Lord's hand. No one else notices his prophecy.

The prophet knows there will come a time when God's justice will triumph. He can wait. While the people around him mock, they can only think on a human timeline. God acts with great patience, but He surely acts. The few who cling to His justice will gloat over those who struggled so hard to ignore His Word. This passage sets the example for anyone determined to walk persistently and patiently in God's ways. He does not fail, though it seems He delays long by our reckoning. It's worth the wait.

So the faithful are like shepherds, greatly isolated and scattered across the countryside. Holiness has always been a very lonely occupation. Yet there will come a day when those called would be rejected, and then the whole world would be invited on the new terms of the Cross. Whatever it is God had wanted to do with Israel would be done instead with the New Israel. All the same miracles, and many more, He would make New Israel able to defeat every human power. Those powers will fear the ragged beggars who walk in the Kingdom of Christ. There is no one like Our God. His mercy and grace are beyond measure. He refuses to be frustrated with the rejection of the Chosen People, and will raise them up again with souls drawn from all Creation.

Introduction to Nahum

There is no particular good reason for rejecting the rather old traditions that identify Nahum as a prophet of the Northern Kingdom long after the Assyrian Exile. There is an obscure reference to a small village named Elkosh somewhere near the Assyrian capital of Nineveh, and nothing prevented faithful Israelites from communicating with the folks back home in Judah. We know Capernaum means "village of Nahum" and tradition says it was the site of his pre-exile home.

The probable date for this prophecy is around 630 BC, based on internal evidence which places him between Assyria's conquest of Thebes (663 BC) and the Scythian raids on Nineveh during the 620s. The tone of this prophetic message is vengeance on an ungrateful empire which so quickly forgot Jehovah's mercy under the prophet Jonah over a century before.

Nahum 1

Nineveh was built entirely on predation, starting with her ancient founder, Nimrod. The worship of predatory warfare symbolizes this ancient city like nothing else, and few since have come anywhere close to this disturbingly violent empire. Because she refused to renounce it for long, despite her usefulness to God in punishing Samaria, she will see her own violent end. That it took God so long to finally punish Nineveh shows the mercy of which Jonah preached, but His power is far beyond the comprehension of anyone among the Assyrians.

God's wrath is more than sufficient to turn the silent dead dust into storm clouds in the desert, turning the sea into a desert itself, withering all green life even in places which never saw drought in human memory. Mountains collapse and valleys become high ridges, and all human life could be so easily snuffed out. The very fortress for those who cling to moral justice is the same destruction poured out on sin. The massive walls of Nineveh accommodated four chariots abreast, but they were nothing against the Maker of all things. During the final siege of the city, a flash flood in the river actually washed away the gates, leaving her wide open to the armies surrounding her. Her arrogant drunken feast that night became a slaughter.

So while some of the finest strategist minds came from that city, they were evil in God's eyes. Thus, when she dared to attack Judah, her troops evaporated in death overnight. The Assyrians fled home and never came to Judah again. So complete was the destruction God promised to bring on Nineveh that she was for a time considered a myth, with no one recognizing the site as that of a great city for many centuries. Thus, go and tell the people in Zion! Nahum's word comes like a messenger over the heights, informing the Judeans they can start celebrating now, because the Assyrian threat is past and can be forgotten like a bad dream.

Nahum 2

Nahum calls out in a mocking voice, like the watchmen on the walls who see the approaching hordes. He warns Nineveh to do all she can to prepare for the coming battle. Yes, for a time the Lord used Assyria to humble His rebellious people, but now it is time for vengeance on the one who enjoyed a little too much wielding that rod. So, indeed, let the Ninevites glory in their military might one last time. We are treated to the image of a well-oiled machine of war, frightening to see, but unable to turn aside the wrath of God.

For, in the very middle of all this, the Lord opens the floodgates and the river washes away the very palace itself. Then the city is flooded with Babylonian and Persian troops, and the population is led into the same kind of exile that she wrought on so many other nations. Like a refreshing pool in a desert land, Nineveh once held great treasures, the very symbol of man conquering his environment. But all too soon she will be no more than a place to plunder. Those who pass by will be shocked at the ruins.

Again, we are reminded why Nineveh must fall. God's Laws forbade such a rapacious predatory spirit, and Assyria worshiped it. Her artwork often featured variations on the theme of the mighty lions, ravaging beasts. So they were in this world, and God will not long tolerate such. So the Lord decreed He was Himself, by His own hand, against Nineveh. There was nothing that could protect her, and all the things on which her pride rested would be destroyed.

Nahum 3

It would be the same as any modern prophet shaking his finger at some dominant superpower, warning their doom was close. It all seems too far beyond the pale, too unlikely. Could there be a god capable of destroying such monumental power? So Nahum rubs it in, conjuring the most shocking images of destruction.

Predation was their god, and the world knew the Ninevites could not be trusted to keep any promises or treaties. God hates broken treaties. When the Ninevites got bored, which came pretty easily, they would start a new war with their closest allies just to have an enemy to attack. They were bursting with plunder, but this simply made them a target.

Were you a mere bystander watching, perhaps the great tumult of chariots and warriors, both inside and outside the city, would be high entertainment. But only a Ninevite could truly appreciate the unspeakable slaughter that was waiting them. In classical Hebrew poetry, Nahum describes a scene of stumbling over dead bodies, the stench and disease so hard to escape because the destruction was beyond description.

The prophet compares the city to a prostitute, but this one always inflicted crippling wounds to all her lovers, forcing them into lifelong dependence on her. It required the most obscene sorcery, calling up the powers of Hell to blind men so. To a Hebrew reader, it's hard to imagine more evil rolled into a single image. What we also find hard to understand is the huge difference between the nudity of intimate privacy versus the hideous exposure of public nakedness. The Lord promised to expose Nineveh, humiliating her in the light of the sun, exposing her as an old hag with the makeup caked on and her gaunt shape exposed from under those colorful enticing sheer skirts with hidden padding. No one dares to weep for such a sight.

The ancient Theban capital of Egypt was so very secure, but Nineveh had no trouble crossing the open water to bring her down. Did she then think herself any more secure than Thebes? All the horrors wrought on Thebes would be worse, if possible, for Nineveh. Did she think herself tough, predatory and violent? Wait until those she thought she ruled take her down – Babylon and Persia. Her own defenders, so numerous as locust swarms, would be like old locusts devoured by yet another fresh generation of an even larger swarm. What you are, you will beget as worse yet.

So the Lord would scatter these warrior peoples, drive them back into their ancient mountain villages to the north of the plains, never again to assemble as a single nation to conquer. No one would remember proudly any association with them, but would cheer, and laugh over her demise. No one will miss her or will reminisce fondly over her greatness. It's time to party hearty, because Assyria is broken!

Introduction to Habakkuk

We know almost nothing of the prophet Habakkuk. From the text itself and from historical context, we can deduce he probably served as a Levite musician, writing his prophecy at the end of Josiah's reign, or shortly thereafter. He seems aware of Babylon's rise to defeat Assyria in

612 BC, but not the defeat of Egypt at Carchemish in 605. Josiah's policy of support for Babylon would make their invasion shocking from Habakkuk's perspective.

This tiny, yet richly poetic narrative, describes a conversation with God. The prophet tries to understand God's long suffering over sin, and His holiness and divine purpose in calling Israel. How can God use evil for His holy purpose? The final solution to this puzzle is a grand psalm complete with musical notation for worship.

Habakkuk 1

Hebrew writing is often condensed in the sense that common expressions and symbolic images substitute for much longer comments. Often the question itself implies an answer not obvious to the modern Western reader. Thus, the parabolic expressions leave us confused because we often lack the background a prophet reasonably assumed his readers would have.

Habakkuk knows the Covenant as rediscovered during the time of Josiah, long forgotten during his grandfather Manasseh's reign. As a Levite it would have been his duty to teach the Law in conferences held throughout the Kingdom of Judah. He understands the divine calling on the Nation of Israel, how they are to live the Law and thus reveal God and His truth. They do not live that Law; it's painfully obvious to anyone. The legacy of Manasseh's gross idolatry still infests the common people everywhere he goes. The old idolatry habits seem intractable, the Law seems foreign, and they can scarcely be restrained from the evil ways taught by false deities. How does Jehovah put up with this?

God's reply implies a full awareness of Judah's sins. Indeed, His patience is gone. He warns the entire nation to pay attention, as they are about to experience something unimaginable. The distant empire they supported, Babylon, that horrifying threat to all in her path, would come to invade and discipline the people of God as His rod of wrath. The Judeans will experience for themselves first hand just how awful a sinful nation can be. The infamous siege mounds will be built against the walls of Jerusalem.

Bad as Israel has been, she was nothing like Babylon. So Habakkuk wonders aloud how God could use something so awful against His own people. He justly characterizes Babylon as a fisherman who casts his net into the world fully stocked with fish. Having eaten all he could hold, he keeps fishing for the sheer evil pleasure of tossing them on the bank to die. Habakkuk is aware that God has a Law for other nations, too, as recorded in the revelation to His people. Are they not also held accountable before Him?

It would be a mistake to think Habakkuk is challenging God. Rather, he reverently asks for assurance that God is consistent with what he believes to be the Lord's own Word, His stated promises. So if God is going to use Babylon to punish Israel, what is to become of Babylon, far more evil than Judah at her worst? There's no question that God holds Israel to a higher standard and Habakkuk accepts this. Rather, he wonders if God has a promise for what comes after that act of discipline on His own.

Habakkuk 2

Wisely does Habakkuk announce he will wait on God to answer, for the Lord does all things in His own good time. We struggle to understand how the Hebrew mind viewed time so differently. The hand of God moves when time is ripe, not according to predetermined scheduling. It is neither clock-driven nor event-driven, but justice-driven. Wise men understand that larger events only seem to be caused by great men, or men in great numbers. In reality, it is God who works through the hearts of both good and evil. But there is a difference in how the just and unjust see the things God does. The prophet knows he'll be corrected, and prepares his heart to respond appropriately.

Pedantic literalism misses the point here. God warns Habakkuk that he could write the revelation on stone without fear it would be wrong. He could make sure it was publicized to any and all, and not be embarrassed by how it turns out later. The real challenge is not the message, but waiting on God. Men are the most impatient of creatures. To us, it seems God is heartless in delaying the revelation of His truth, but in His eyes the problem is our truculent folly. It's not as if God isn't aware of our time sense, but is hardly moved by it. Thus, He restates the general principle: An upright heart will always find God faithful, but an unjust man will never get what he really wants. It's not about events and property, but about communion with God.

So Habakkuk should expect to see the Babylonians insatiable and utterly rapacious. They will consume like a fire and never get enough, yet in the end, this very thing will become a joke. This signature lack of contentment will be what destroys them, because they won't be able to keep any of their plunder very long. The Babylonian Empire stood less than a century. There was nothing wrong with their learning, nor any failure in the genius of her rulers, but her dark soul was empty and dead even while she lived.

God will never allow His glory to be muted. Even when it seems the whole world assails His Name, He rules. Is it not odd how so many take advantage of human weakness to dominate and oppress, and forget their own vulnerabilities? Whatever human talent can raise up, God can easily trump when He's ready. You cannot exploit His Creation without His justice noting whether you seek His glory or your own. Humanity so quickly forgets and worships its own hands, or what those hands can produce. How quickly Creation forgets and wipes away the greatest accomplishments of humanity, yet bows reflexively to the Creator!

Habakkuk 3

It would be almost embarrassing to attempt breaking down the rich poetic imagery in this grand Hebrew psalm. Far more important to the reader is understanding the uniquely Hebrew approach to certain fundamental questions.

Modern Western man chokes on the notion that a single concept can contain two utterly opposing results, and how someone can tremble in fear and rejoice at the same time. Yet Habakkuk clearly points out how God's divine Presence affects each of us in different ways. The difference is rooted in our attitude toward Him and His revelation. The song opens with the prophet calling on God to rekindle His ancient revelation in the hearts of men.

Habakkuk mentions two territories in the southern regions of both Edom and Judah. They are strongly connected to the earliest period beginning at Sinai when the Covenant was fresh. In the region of Teman was the trial of the fiery serpents and in Paran was the Forty Years' Wandering. God arises in His greatest power when judging sin, particularly the sins of His own. Pagan nations are not privileged to know God so personally, but Israel was His very own family on earth, the people who would give birth to His Son. Pagan nations would face His wrath on much gentler terms because they weren't expected to really know Him so well. Israel was held to a much higher standard.

Yet He cannot abide sin. He disciplines His own people and makes them stronger, but the same wrath destroys those who don't know Him. Sadly, we recognize here that if Israel should cease obeying Him, they will also see destruction. God's promises would not fail while the earth stands, and His revelation will always come forth, one way or another. Habakkuk weaves into his song the recognition He will always have a people on earth, but to the degree Israel abandons His message, so they will die in His wrath. The people of Israel could well become His enemy, and terrifying is the fate awaiting His enemies.

Yet those who live for His Laws could make themselves a part of the lusty joy of His weapons of truth. So having truly heard with his very heart the message God gave back to him, Habakkuk is utterly shaken anew by the force of this reassurance in both directions. The fruit of the land was at His whim, and if Israel turns away from Him, there would be no fruit of revelation, and no fruit of the ground, either. Because he walks in fear of God, Habakkuk fears nothing else. He can handle the trials of the future, living in a nation that has largely forgotten her Master and Lord, with the prospect of being crushed by Babylon.

Introduction to Zephaniah

The great-grandson of King Hezekiah, Zephaniah was part of the royal clan, a near relative to King Manasseh under whose reign he was born. This was the infamous king who dragged Judah into every imaginable form of idolatry and desecration of the Temple. During his fifty years of rule, the Law of Moses was virtually forgotten, all available copies confiscated and destroyed. Earlier prophets made it clear that this was the last straw with God.

After the brief reign of Amon, Zephaniah stood in the court of Josiah (637-607 BC), the righteous boy king. Nothing hints here whether this was before or after the reforms began, but surely this royal prophet urged them on with youthful zeal. More than likely, Zephaniah is reacting to the insincerity of the people in responding to the reforms by simply taking their idolatries underground. Thus, Zephaniah warns it's too late. While sincere repentance would help a few, the kingdom had been forfeited irrevocably.

Zephaniah 1

After identifying himself and asserting his divine calling, Zephaniah proceeds directly with dire warnings. God as Creator could easily wipe away the entire universe with a single thought. More to the point, He was promising the fat and sassy Judeans that their days were numbered.

Everything they could see would be gone, forgotten. It might as well be the end of the world. In order to cleanse the Land of sin, God had to remove the idols, and that meant everyone bowing down to them would also be destroyed. If you do not render your offerings to Jehovah, you will be the sacrifice He demands instead. The list of idolatrous practices is merely hinted at here in broad summary.

Zephaniah uses the term “the Great Day of the Lord” repeatedly. In popular use, it refers to the blessing of God’s wrath on His enemies, but Judah refused to acknowledge they had become the enemy. So the prophet warns that there will be a great feast on that day, and they are the main course on the menu. The assault would begin with the northern edge of the city, since the Babylonians would approach from that direction. Such a massive army would raise a huge cloud of dust visible from a great distance. All the wailing to God in fear would be too little, too late. It was too late to pack up the belongings and flee. All the investments in goods and trade would be swept away by the invaders.

As with the Passover, God would notice who had been faithful, and who had not. He would scour Jerusalem day and night, hoping to find just a few worthy of saving. The rest would be pulled from their hiding places for punishment. It’s almost a play on his own name, as Zephaniah means “the Lord hides” His own from danger. He paints a poetic picture of sorrow upon sorrow as wave upon wave of devastation sweeps over the city. First came the Scythians and their scorched earth methods, then three rounds of Babylonian invasion, each time deporting more people and destroying more of the city. Words could not describe the horrors that awaited those who continued rejecting God’s just demand for their devotion under the Covenant.

Zephaniah 2

Having warned them that Jehovah would bring His wrath upon the entire known world in the previous chapter, Zephaniah warns the people of Judah that they may as well gather themselves and save God the trouble. Like stalks and chaff from the wheat, they would be collected for disposal. It would only be worse if they tried to hide, and perhaps they could take the opportunity to repent. Meanwhile, those who humble themselves before Him and obey the Covenant may yet escape the worst. If they do not repent, they are no different than any other nation, except for their much higher accountability to God, since they claim Him and He made them from nothing.

What would happen to the other nations, the ones with no special responsibility to God?

With a delicious poetic assonance, Zephaniah talks about the Philistine coast. Gaza would be a ghost town, Ashkelon an ash heap. Ashdod would be the half-day town, driven out by noon. Ekron would be evacuated, too. The invading forces would leave no permanent buildings standing, and the surviving faithful remnant of God would use the ruins for their sheep pens at night.

The Lord never forgot the arrogant taunting of Moab and Ammon, making obscene suggestions about Jehovah and His people. He promises to make their homes about as habitable as the ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah. Their possessions would be plunder for the faithful. The taunting

would be turned around, and all the pagan gods would be embarrassing to the people who worship them. In fear, the nations would turn to Jehovah. By implication the prophet warns his own nation is hardly so wise.

The ruling dynasty of Egypt at that time was Ethiopian, and they had harassed the same little kingdoms, but in their vast greatness they would be destroyed and humbled. Assyria, the imperial power everyone feared at that time, would be destroyed, too. Their vast imperial capital at Nineveh would become a wild animal sanctuary. Oh, see how special she is! People will taunt her ruins.

If God has such firm plans to deal thus with pagan nations who don't even know Him, what will He do to His own people? He will by no means let them escape His wrath.

Zephaniah 3

How should Jerusalem remain exempt from God's wrath if she is no different from Nineveh? In times past, when disaster struck the people would turn from their sins and call on Jehovah. Now they simply turn to even worse sins. Political and religious leaders alike twist their roles completely backward. While they did thus, God had been the very definition of faithfulness, having lived in their midst the whole time. He manifested His justice to them daily; they openly shamed Him. He destroyed their enemies, demonstrating His power. Surely they would respect Him after all He did! No, she begged for the same treatment by sinning even worse than those who threatened her.

Israel refused to distinguish herself among nations as God's own unique people. So when He gathers the entire world together for That Day, the nation will take her share of wrath. His judgment will wipe away sin, which of course means He will remove those who cling to it. This purging will see a remnant from all nations respond and turn to Him. People from all over the entire world would worship His Name. So it would be that they would all stand with the righteous remnant of Judah. Whatever is left will not act anything like the kingdom He was going to crush in just a short time.

Of course, there can be no literal fulfillment of this. Rather, Zephaniah is seeing with spiritual eyes the day when the Messiah would come and bring forth a New Covenant to all mankind. The image drawn here symbolizes the Kingdom of Heaven, not a politically restored Judah. His wrath against sin reached a climax at the Cross.

So it's only natural to expect joy unspeakable. The Lord calls on the ancient City to rejoice in the rise of the New Israel. His own Son, the true Messiah, would rule over the people in this Eternal Kingdom, in a Spiritual Jerusalem. Everything Israel was meant to be will return, unassailable against all sin. Those who refuse to join in this spiritual celebration would be excluded. The old shadowy political Israel would be forgotten. We see in Zephaniah's final words echoes prefiguring the message of Christ, the Good Shepherd. He will restore His fame by His own hand, making His people the blessed nation others would scramble to join.

Introduction to Haggai

His name means “Festive” – the only figure in Scripture so named. In 538 BC, Cyrus released the Exiles to return to their various kingdoms whence Babylon had taken them. The decree for those of Judah was generous, but only a few were willing to leave the now prosperous life they had in Mesopotamia. So a mere 50,000 arrived to the ruins of Jerusalem after a long journey.

The task appeared impossible, but they began early clearing the Temple foundation. The Samaritans who had been living to the north welcomed the Judeans home, as they saw it. But the former Babylonian captives made it clear that the Samaritans had no part in their worship of Jehovah. The Samaritans knew the name, but not the God behind it, nor His Word. This was the start of a very ugly rivalry, which included all sorts of political intrigue and outright threats from the client rulers of Persia who had been in the land during the absence of the Judeans. This tension stopped the Temple building very early. So the Returnees went about building their homes and reclaiming the agricultural land, which had lain fallow so many years. Eventually, the political tensions became a permanent excuse for not seeking the Lord’s face and getting back to building His Temple. Haggai worked with the prophet Zechariah to stir up their zeal and get the people back on task.

Haggai 1

The prophet offers clear and precise dates. He is by far the most literal of Hebrew prophets. Even then, it’s easy to mistake his pragmatism and direct language as saying something he did not. This is not a simple matter of earning God’s blessings, but a blunt accounting presented to people who had already forgotten too much of their ancient Hebrew culture. This is still Hebrew prophecy with all the otherworldly symbolism, but the prophet must catch the attention of some folks who are somewhat less Hebrew during his time.

The edict of Cyrus to return was 538 BC, and the Returnees left a year or so later. They have been back at least 15 years, having stopped working on the Temple after only clearing and repairing the foundation. Haggai is moved by the Lord to address them on the New Moon festival in what would be for us mid-August 520 BC. A new Emperor Darius was now on the throne, and had communicated his favor for the Judeans, willing to silence the local opposition to their temple. There was no longer any excuse.

Haggai first pokes at the leading residents of the city for repeating the worn excuse it just wasn’t yet the right time to start building on the Temple again. So while they were enjoying sumptuous quarters, God had to meet with them in the open. Could they not spare at least a covered shed for Him? The issue was not politics nor time nor resources. If they were short of resources, it was only because they had neglected the Source. That is, they had not obeyed the Lord’s command. He had told them to rebuild; they resisted. If in every way they obeyed the Law of Moses, but didn’t obey simple and obvious commands, then the blessings of the Law would be withheld. They were doing without, because they made God do without. Creation would fight them because their moral motives were wrong.

Get to work, Judah! Haggai addressed his message directly to the regent, whom we know by the name Zerubbabel (“Born in Babylon”), and the High Priest Joshua. Because they obeyed, it

was hard for the people to argue, and the work began. They realized their God was alive and paying attention. They organized and got their plans together, beginning the work in earnest about three weeks later.

Haggai 2

From the very beginning, when God first chose to reveal Himself, He warned consistently: What He would promise to do for humanity was conditional. God's blessings in this life have always been bound up in the moral fabric woven into Creation. Prophets seldom said something would happen in any absolute sense, but offered divine contingencies. Haggai brings such a contingent message in this chapter. The time is a month after the previous message.

First, we probably have a tiny few who survived the full seventy years of exile and could dimly recall Solomon's Temple. While much had been lost during the reigns of evil kings in Jerusalem who succeeded Solomon, the size and grandeur had remained. During this time of reconstruction, it was painfully obvious that the Returnees had little of the resources and equipment Solomon used. Instead, it was a much smaller undertaking laid out in the first outline of stonework. You can be sure that those who remembered would have despaired of seeing the likes of the First Temple again. God's answer was, in effect, that He was not insulted. The issue was obedience, not man's measures of architectural glory. He told them not to fear that He would be angry over a smaller Temple.

Did they want to see a grand and glorious Temple again? Trust in God. He could do it, *would* do it if they only believed and obeyed. Haggai declares that God can shake all human governments loose, turn things upside down and make Jerusalem the center of the world. Every nation would bring their finest treasures, if these people building the Temple would simply embrace the vision of taking the Covenant path before them. It could happen!

Two more months pass, and it's around the first of December 520 BC by our reckoning. Time for another message wrapped in symbolism. Was ritual holiness contagious, or was defilement? It was the latter. The people had been bringing their offerings during that time when they refused to obey God. Therefore, they were unclean, and their offerings were unclean. It's not the amount of the offering, any more than it depends on the size of the Temple building, but it depends on the obedience of the people under the Covenant. So now, as the last food from a bad time was consumed during these winter months, God promises obedience will bring such a harvest as to wipe away the memory of the current hunger. Today they were walking in obedience, and everything they touched was blessed. "Just you wait and see," says the Lord.

One final message came to Haggai at that time. The Lord told Zerubbabel that he was the man. Because he had taken seriously God's command through Haggai, the Lord was prepared to raise him up as the next real King of Judah. And instead of being some petty regent in a backwater pile of rubble, he could be the ruler of a revived Kingdom of Israel. It could happen!

We know these things didn't happen literally, but the principle of promise did not fail. Because their obedience flagged and their trust failed, much of what could have been did not come in their time. Instead, it waited for the Messiah for fulfillment. In Him, the literal meaning was left

behind as too paltry, and the grand unspeakable blessings of these promises in the Spiritual Realm came instead.

Introduction to Zechariah

Zechariah is a common Hebrew name, meaning “the Lord Remembers.” This one is the grandson of the Iddo, one of the priests who returned in the first wave under Cyrus’s decree. This makes the prophet much younger than his tag-team partner, Haggai. The latter wrote short and rather blunt messages, while Zechariah is much more lyrical, with numerous visions in parabolic language.

Most of the early visions come in a single night. The latter chapters (9-14) appear to be written much later in the prophet’s life, and are loaded with Messianic promises. The objective was to fire a vision of what God could and would do with those building His Temple if they would only obey and remain faithful.

Zechariah 1

The prophet dates himself (October 520 BC) and identifies himself as a priestly prophet. He plunges immediately into a message very like that of Haggai, his partner. He reminds the people that they have been in trouble for a very good reason, and notes repeatedly that He is the Sovereign Lord. They ignored the prophets and died, along with the prophets who warned them. But His Word has not died; His revelation is eternal and unwavering. The conditions under which they were punished remain the same, just as the promises for grand blessings.

A few months pass, and it’s mid-February 519 BC. Haggai is still around, but writes no more. Zechariah is paying attention to the Lord and receives a vision. In the vision, the prophet is down in the Kidron Valley and sees a rider on a red horse among the myrtle trees growing there. This rider is identified as the Angel of the Lord, whose significance is that he speaks directly for God. Behind him among the trees are more horses and riders. The rich symbolism is not meant to draw direct notice, but the message is: Regardless of what man sees, God’s angels report there is no political disturbance which can affect the folks living in Jerusalem. There is no excuse for slacking off on building the Temple.

This lead angel then addresses Jehovah, noting that the Temple has been in ruins roughly seventy years (586-519 BC) and God has been quite angry with the Judeans. How much longer? The prophet reports that God answers His angel with pleasant words, and the angel reports that God is now favoring Zion again. He granted some opportunities to the pagan nations around Judah, and it seems they had grown complacent about that, so He’s ready to stir things up again. He’s going to move His people to stretch the surveyor’s line over His Temple – to get serious about finishing the building – and restore a bustling and prosperous life to the cities of Judah.

That vision fades into another, as the prophet sees four horns, representing powerful enemies that surround Judah. Upon asking the Angel of the Lord what they mean, Zechariah is told they

symbolize the nations that God used to correct His straying people. Then the Lord shows him four skilled workmen, symbolizing men who have studied the revelation of God. Like a skilled worker who can cut off those horns, they can terrorize the pagan nations if the people of God will simply learn and obey the Word. Again, God will back His Covenant if His people will simply walk in it. Nothing can frighten them if they stand in the shadow of Jehovah.

As always, the prophet speaks of what God wants to do. The actual results rest in the hearts of the people.

Zechariah 2

God continues giving Zechariah visions of what He wants so much to do for Judah. The prophet sees a figure bearing a measuring line heading up the valley toward the city. Zechariah asks where he is going, and the surveyor replies that he is about to measure the city's new layout. At that time, the angel who had been speaking with Zechariah went out to meet another coming from somewhere else. The new arrival instructs the first to tell the prophet that God plans to cause such a rapid expansion of population in the city that there would be no point in building a wall, something the residents were hoping to do some day. Instead, God Himself would be a wall of fire about the people, protecting them from any possible harm.

So the Lord calls to those still in Babylon – popularly referred to as the Northland, since it was very long trip north just to reach the old Babylonian borders on the Upper Euphrates River. The Lord calls for those still living there to flee back to Judah. The cryptic warning regards an uprising by the old Babylonian nobility against their Persian rulers. They would be crushed, of course, because they dared to harm the people of Judah. He refers to it as daring to poke the center of His eye, something painful and unforgettable.

If the rest of the people come home and embrace afresh the Covenant, then they can be sure God Himself will return to live in the Temple: His *shekeinah* glory would return. Then the people would realize Zechariah wasn't just spouting wild demented dreams. If only the people would return in flesh and in spirit to obeying His Word.

Zechariah 3

The High Priest represents the people to God, and God to the people. It was known that the peoples' sins could see him die on the Day of Atonement when he entered the Holy of Holies with the incense offering (Leviticus 16:13). The High Priest might appear pretty nice in the vestments of his office, but that's what the eyes of men see. Could we see things from the Spirit Realm, we would see the High Priest clothed in whatever state of covenant purity the people stood.

In this vision, the High Priest stands before the Angel of the Lord. At his right hand the Accuser stands to denounce him before the Lord. First, the voice of God through the Angel rebukes the Accuser. Doing so twice confirms that he must shut his mouth. It's not as if he has no case, but the Judge has other priorities. He refers to the High Priest as a piece of wood snatched from the fire, and put out so as to preserve what was left. For whatever reason, the Judge has decided that He wants to keep some portion of the Nation of Israel awhile longer.

So we are treated to the scene where the Judge recognizes that the High Priest is wearing sewage-stained garments. Nasty smelling in God's nostrils, but there is provision to fix this problem. He is stripped clean and clothed in fresh clean garments so his service is acceptable. This is rather like God saying that He will absorb the costs of sin and allow the people to try again. Thus, the Lord speaks through His Angel to announce the condition for this rescue. Should the people give themselves to living according to eternal purposes, they will be permitted to live in the company of angels. That is, the angels of God will hang around the people and keep the Accuser at bay. They will abundantly supply all the promises of the Covenant.

This rescued firebrand symbolizes a branch that serves a purpose, and it's a good Hebrew pun, because the terms "Branch" (sprout, bud, a green shoot) and "Servant" combined have long symbolized the Messiah. The Lord wants Judah to understand their holiness will prepare them to receive the Messiah when He comes. Their failure will not hold Him back, but would limit their participation in the blessings of His reign. He wants them to build a life on the cornerstone of this promise: The Lord can remove their vast long catalog of national sin in a single act if they embrace the calling He offers here. The promise closes with the traditional image of *shalom* – everyone in the shade of his own vine and his own fig tree with enough to invite friends to share the bounty.

Zechariah 4

While the previous chapter was to encourage Joshua in his role as priest, here we see a message to keep Zerubbabel on fire. The prophet visualizes being awakened from sleep, and the Angel of the Lord asks him to describe what he sees. The golden menorah stands fed by pipes from two olive trees. We know the menorah represents the revelation of God primarily through Israel, not Israel the nation but Israel the mission. They were called to be a light to the world, bringing His divine message through their obedience to the Covenant. Returning now from Exile, Zechariah has reminded them repeatedly to cling to that covenant, because God has promised to bring back every blessing of the past, raising the restored Judah to an even higher standing in world affairs, but only if they would obey.

Thus, the Angel affirms this whole future of possibilities will come not by any human achievements, but by God's personal Presence in His people through His Spirit. The two trees are the civil and ritual offices, king and priest, who witness to the power of God's spirit. By their faithfulness, they will be the primary source that feeds the lamp of God's revelation through the national calling.

The mountains would flatten themselves before Zerubbabel, which Jesus echoed in His comments about moving mountains. Having already laid the foundation, the prophet now proclaims it is this king who would finish the work, placing the final capstone. He would chant about the power of God's grace. Again, Zechariah calls on the king to recognize God sees not with man's eyes, but sees things most men cannot. The relatively small size and simplicity of this new Temple could still be the House of God if Judah would make Him feel welcome there. And what could they build some day in the future if they remained in His Covenant?

Finally, the Angel specifically explains the symbolism of the two trees, the two roles of priest and king that witness to God's driving power behind their leadership. If they would faithfully and confidently lead this people in obedience, they would see God flatten any resistance. They had nothing to fear.

Zechariah 5

Zechariah presents two visions of God cleansing the land. If the people turn in their hearts to His holiness, He responds by granting even more holiness.

First comes a massive scroll floating in air. The wording refers to the common image of a judgment handed down from Heaven's throne. Not merely the Land of Judah, but the whole earth is covered by the curses of God's Law Covenants. The Angel notes the two representative sins selected from the middle of the two tables of the Decalogue. Theft is a sin against your fellow man and deception a sin against God. If the people of Judah will cling to the Covenant, their holy influence could change the whole world. God's curse against sin could destroy everyone on earth who clings to evil, but the faithfulness of His people releases judgment against all sin.

In the next vision, the Angel of the Lord calls attention to something departing. He first points out the thing itself, a basket roughly the size of our modern bushel. Normally it would be holding grain, a standard symbol of commerce. The Angel notes that this symbolizes the most important thing in the minds of most people: material wealth. There is a lid of lead on the basket weighing a talent (30kg) necessary to keep the contents inside: a tiny female figure. She tried to get out as soon as the lid was lifted, but the Angel pushed her back down and closed the lid. He referred to her as the symbol of wickedness.

Then we see this basket is borne aloft by two women with large wings from a stork, a maternal bird. They were doing the right thing, observing their proper role. They were bearing this basket away to Babylon, where a temple would be built for the little goddess inside, and she was sure to like it. In symbolic logic, there is no place for female deities except on the side of Darkness. Women are forbidden to rule over men. All goddesses are inherently evil; women cannot handle power without harm. In this case, we have a goddess of commerce, the symbol of Babylon's ancient fascination with material wealth through commerce. That's where she belongs, not in Judah.

We often forget in our modern Western world that the fundamental flaw of feminism is demanding control over every factor in the nesting instinct. A part of the curse of the Fall on women is seeking that control mostly in a materialistic and political sense. Zechariah here assumes such an understanding, that women of faith know they have to let go and trust their men and their God. The little goddess in the basket represents the worst of the fallen instinct in women, which manifests today as feminism. Most people don't recognize that feminism is simply another face of middle class merchant culture, part of the symbolic identity of Babylon. Godly women would try to keep this nasty instinct out of their community, as do the winged motherly figures in the vision.

It's not hard to see where John got some of the symbols for his Apocalypse. God supplies all our needs; seeking the things themselves is inherently evil. This is the fundamental claim in the Law of Moses: Seek God and He will provide all needs. Seek your needs and you'll forget God, ending up accursed.

Zechariah 6

In the final vision that Zechariah received that night, he saw chariots emerging from between Mount Zion and the Mount of Olives, rushing down the Kidron Valley. The symbolism is well established: red horses for war, black for economic and social disturbances (calamity), white for conquest and celebration, while the dappled symbolizes disease and pestilence. They report to the Angel of the Lord where Zechariah is standing. The Angel tells the prophet they have been quite eager to pursue a mission; he then commands them to execute.

The horses of calamity and conquest headed north to the Euphrates crossing, preparing to enter Babylon. We know the old displaced Babylonian nobility rose up in revolt against the Persian emperor a few years after this vision, but the Angel reports the chariots will succeed in their mission. Babylon's nobles were decimated by Darius' troops. The horses of pestilence headed toward Egypt, but we aren't told what happened to the horses of war. Perhaps they were all over the place. The vision ends abruptly.

The chapter continues with a symbolic act. It serves well to remember that Hebrew symbolism is far more complex than mere allegory. There is no precise intellectual meaning to savor, but a call to commitment. It's a vision of what God wants to do for the people of Judah if they will obey.

A delegation had come down from the exiles in Babylon, bringing offerings for the continuing work on the Temple. The names are impossible to trace, and the prophet mixes in nicknames that tend to confuse modern readers. For example, Hen ("Grace") is short for Josiah ("Gracious One"). From the gifts they brought, Zechariah was to take some silver and gold to make a memorial crown. The language used indicates it was two rings, a double crown. It symbolized joining the two offices of priest and king, so vividly portrayed earlier. In this case, the prophet shows God's desire to bring His Messiah ("Branch") to rule over the people, joining the two offices as one.

To symbolize this, the prophet uses the High Priest, who isn't permitted by Moses' Law to wear a crown, and places it on his head. Then he pronounces the meaning. It's worth noting here that this image was twisted out of shape a couple of centuries later when the High Priest did usurp the civil authority of Judah shortly before Rome conquered the area. Meanwhile, the little ceremony sees Zechariah announcing that God wants to build his real divine Temple – His home – among the people in the person of this coming Messiah, who will rule as king and priest, two offices with one head.

Then the crown was handed to the delegation for presentation in the Temple as a memorial. The delegates were supposed to take this message back to encourage more Exiles to come home and join in building the Temple. When these additional people join the Restoration, everyone would

see it as fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy, but only if the people there continued walking faithfully in the Covenant.

Zechariah 7

Based on the Old Testament calendar, this message is dated December 518 BC. There came a delegation of folks from Bethel, 10 miles (16km) to the north and bit east. We recall a significant number of people escaped the Babylonian Exile and lived briefly under Gedaliah as governor. Some of them revolted, murdered Gedaliah and fled to Egypt, dragging Jeremiah along with them. However, a few stayed faithful to the new government and lived mostly in Bethel. During the long seventy years of isolation in a land mostly depopulated, they had developed the custom of solemn fasts to commemorate different events connected to the destruction of Jerusalem. The fifth month of every year they fasted for the burning of Jerusalem; the seventh month was for the murder of Gedaliah.

If the Covenant People sense a moving of the Spirit of God to fast and weep over sin and its awful consequences, only a fool would resist the call. When it becomes a mere ritual, it's worse than pointless; it mocks God and His Word. What's the difference between feasting and fasting? Were any of the ritual observances a matter of truly seeking God's face? Zechariah relays God's message that they should search their own hearts about this. Were they genuinely sorry they had participated in ignoring the warnings from the former prophets back before Babylon invaded?

What did it look like when Israel obeyed the Covenant? It was a closely-knit community of familial care. Unthinkable is the image of any unfortunate people suffering genuine want, because their wider community family would look after them. This is the moral imperative and there is no excuse for resentment and dishonesty. No one can explain why Israel left this community stability behind like some long forgotten tattered tent fluttering in the desert winds, while they lived in wood paneled stone houses and had sharp dealings with each other. The simplicity of mercy and community welfare had not been a part of Israeli life for centuries, yet was precisely what God required as the very foundation of the Covenant. Because of this, the vast storehouse of blessing was exchanged for an ocean of wrath and sorrow.

God cried out to them even as He began closing His fist to strike, calling them back to simplicity and purity before Him. Don't stand in the place where wrath falls. After the wrath began to rain down upon them, it was too late to wail His name. Was this in their minds when they made a show of weeping those seventy years isolated in Bethel? When God's people make war against their own covenant with Him, they should not expect Him to keep them together as a nation in their own homeland. Their identity was their mission to reveal Him and His moral imperatives by living them. Without that, they were dust in the wind, to be scattered among the rest of humanity. All the more so did this come true when they murdered the Messiah.

Zechariah 8

The theme continues: What would God do if His people adhered to His Covenant? The prophet makes the case that, throughout her history, Israel had only rarely been faithful. Yet, were there

not miracles aplenty in her official archives and prophetic records? They had yet to see what mighty powers God held back because of unfaithfulness. Zechariah's message is for them to give God a chance to do what He wanted so much to do. The miracles stood waiting in the shadow of the Covenant. As he reminds them repeatedly, this is the God who rules over all Creation. Nothing is impossible.

Was Jerusalem a mess? It was not because the Lord hated the city. Indeed, He was cooking up some serious revenge on those who did hate it. He would restore the former nicknames regarding what a wonderful place it was, the city of His Temple. Picture it: A city so peaceful and prosperous that people grow ancient there in safety, while children play in clean streets. Does that sound too outlandish? Just keep building in obedience to His command and such a vision would seem rather ordinary. He's preparing to crush every nation on every side, shatter every empire and make His city the one best place on earth to live. The Diaspora would have no reason to live abroad.

So the Lord reinforced the message of Zechariah and the other prophets, encouraging them to keep building the Temple. In His wrath, God had removed any hope of peace, cursing the land to the point that even the most primitive cooperation between animals was gone. But if the Returnees really wanted to see God's *shalom*, it was already rolling across the land toward them. Crops would miraculously respond and grow like the ancient times when the spies of Israel saw huge harvests, a land flowing with milk and honey. Trust Him. God was aching to make it all return, if they would simply embrace His justice.

Regarding those fasts? All of them would become times of feasting and rejoicing, with all the memories of the siege wiped away. Try to imagine Gentiles begging to come and live as guests in the land, not least because it was the place of God's revelation. Jerusalem would become famous as the place to find God's face, because His people were eager to make Him known to the world. That's the plan. Were these people ready?

Zechariah 9

God revealed His Law Covenants to explain moral justice in this Fallen Realm, but also to symbolize the truth of the Spirit Realm. Hebrew scholars tell us these last chapters of Zechariah are in a noticeably different tone than the previous. The prophet tends to ignore the dividing line between literal events and their spiritual meanings. Reading these final chapters requires a mind capable of thinking on multiple levels at once. Some of this came true quite literally, while other parts are clearly Messianic with no possible literal meaning. What matters most is how it reveals God and His ways.

In this chapter, the Lord emphasizes His image as warrior shepherd sheikh. Hadrach was the Hebrew version of the *Hatarikka* area described in Assyrian annals and roughly approximates modern Lebanon minus the coastline. There was an alliance across from Tyre and Sidon, Hamath to Syria during the war between Persia and Greece. Zechariah describes Alexander's conquests some two centuries after his time. He destroyed the eastern portions first, and then turned toward the coast. Using the ancient onshore rubble of the original City of Tyre, the Greek soldiers built a causeway out to the island fortress, which neither Assyria nor Babylon

managed to take. Alexander destroyed it completely. He skipped all around Jerusalem and took out the four Philistine cities listed. The remnants of that coastal nation were absorbed into Judah.

In the prophet's mind, this was connected to the mission of the Messiah. Despite the Greek and then Roman domination and the eventual destruction of Jerusalem, what matters here is that God will not allow His revelation to fall silent on the earth. So Jerusalem could rejoice in the literal protection for a time. However, the whole point is the Messiah and how He will bring peace through His victorious death and the power of His Holy Spirit working in the hearts of men.

Turning to those who had not yet made their way back to Judah, the Lord reminds those in Jerusalem that other members of the nation would join them. This happened literally to some degree, but more importantly, the souls who belonged to Christ were released from their moral prison to seek the Savior of all mankind. So while the Maccabees did eventually defeat those who inherited Alexander's empire, notably the Ptolemy and Seleucid rulers, it's more important to see how God's revelation would seek to roll back their Hellenizing influence. Each of the various rulers pressed on with Alexander's evangelistic fervor of Greek philosophy and culture. Jesus and the Apostles made it a point to fight Hellenism, reasserting the ancient Hebrew mysticism in the early churches.

Those who return to these ancient ways will be full of joy and celebration at their citizenship in Heaven. Zechariah conjures the image of a grand feast with countless sacrifices in the Temple. God considers as His crowning glory the souls given to Christ for eternity.

Zechariah 10

As before, the prophet reveals to us the truth of God on multiple levels. This is how God operates, an image of what He is like when people embrace His truth. On the immediate level, Judah has yet to fully embrace and claim the Covenant of Moses still in force. At the same time, no one denies the Messianic intent of this chapter. Christ conquered from the Cross and from the grave, so reading this literally would be sheer stupidity.

Under the Covenant, the people should not take God's blessings for granted. Therefore, they are instructed to ask for the blessings. This puts them in a frame of mind to hear His prophetic word to meet contingencies in a changing world. But He would surely bring the necessary rains in season for the growth of crops, both literal and spiritual. You might hear claims on behalf of false gods about the plainly literal blessings, but they cannot offer a window onto eternity. When the leaders of Judah in times past allowed the people to wander from the Covenant, they were like worthless shepherds. We also see the image of goats as protectors of the flock, a symbol of political leaders who don't understand spiritual matters. They have only a limited use. If they fail that purpose, they are worse than useless; they are threats.

God wants to turn His sheep into a conquering army. We have rather obvious images of the Messiah who is the Cornerstone on which the whole building of community life rests. He is the peg on the wall, and every good and useful thing depends on Him. He is the battle bow, ready

to strike His enemies from afar. He will command the commanders, and they will oppress the enemy. Evil and injustice will be stomped like the muck under their feet as they march past.

In both the literal and in the Messianic sense, the Lord is eager to rebuild His kingdom on this earth. Think of all the people who can be called home, if only those already there would ensure it is the home of truth and justice, the place to which the wandering souls return for rest, peace and security. What a homecoming celebration it could be! They will come with tales of how God opened the way for them, drying up the Nile, destroying the power of the Assyrian army, breaking the whip of the slavers. Think of a kingdom of people who walk about in honest representation of what God says He is.

Zechariah 11

This chapter is very difficult to follow in most English translations. It was probably rather challenging to those who read it in Hebrew during Zechariah's day. There are powerful dramatic images; it would seem Zechariah acted out some of these to symbolize a claim against the Nation of Israel as a whole. The underlying theme is destruction that came in the past, but also would come again in the future, against certain characteristic sins.

The first few verses are dramatic poetry, warning of God's wrath. The picture is a raging fire burning all the vegetation, starting in the north, working around the east side, then sweeping south and west. Then we see the Lord calling for evil shepherds, offering the unspoken hint that His people have refused to obey the good shepherds He once set over them as rulers. Since they refuse to obey, He would appoint evil shepherds. Evil they want; evil they shall have in abundance. These shepherds would be totally mercenary in their approach, selling their own citizens to foreigners. That is, the kings would lead them in the ways of heathen nations with their pagan deities.

There are two shepherd staves; one represents the blessings of the Covenant, the other a national unity of stability and strength. The business of hiring and firing three shepherds in a single month found literal fulfillment in the past, but represents how God would create instability by rapid changes in government. None of their governments would care a whit for what God had revealed of His ways. They defied the Covenant to the point that it no longer had any meaning. God would take the blessings away.

These things were fulfilled particularly in the coming of Christ. His teaching and death on the Cross ended the national Covenant once and for all. His people had so long rejected what that Covenant meant and had so utterly perverted it that the time came to end doing business that way on the earth. From that time on, all God's dealings with mankind would be only through His Son; He would be the New Covenant. Those who were paying attention realized what it meant, that a small group who were afflicted in soul at the awful things Israel and Judah had done against God's Laws would be a new foundation.

What was it worth to the people of God that He had done so much for them? How would they receive His own Son? They offered the price of a slave gored by an ox. While this was fulfilled somewhat literally in Judas' price for betraying Jesus, it simply points out how easily the people rejected God's revelation. The treasure of all Creation is something they hardly bothered

examining, thinking they could buy it off cheaply and make it go away. God sarcastically refers to “this princely sum.” Shortly after the Ascension of Christ, what was left of Judah dissolved in bitter divisions and warfare, which took away their national identity. Thus, the staff of Union was lost.

They would be turned over to even worse shepherds who were eager to exploit them. These shepherds would be worse than predators. Then, they would also be judged in their turn.

Zechariah 12

God is poised to make things happen that haven’t been seen in a very long time, and many things not yet seen before. If Judah will repent and obey the Covenant, she can expect a bonus, blossoming from such a tiny remnant to a world power again. That grand future is within reach. Will they seize the moment?

Do they suppose they’ve faced opposition up to now? They haven’t seen anything yet. The lesson of Moses before Pharaoh was how God raises up human opposition only so He can crush it in the eyes of the world. If Judah were truly faithful, the whole world would oppose her. And God would crush the whole world at her feet. God says He is ready to make Jerusalem a cup of His wrath, to make the surrounding kingdoms stagger at the unimaginable blow to their arrogance and pride. They might as well try to lift a massive stone buried in the earth, because it will hurt them just trying. Was Judah ready to see God work so powerfully that the very horses of the attacking hordes would be blinded? Are they ready to then lead the world into His holiness?

If the people choose holiness in their hearts, God will grant them mighty kings like David again, setting on fire everyone opposing God’s plans for His people. Yet, God Himself will defend Judah, so that the kings can focus on more important matters of justice among the people. The oldest and weakest will be like David, and the king would be like a mighty angel of God. No one would ever dare attack His people again.

With such a heart of valiant obedience, you can imagine how the king would lead them. The whole kingdom would be the home of repentance. They would remain deeply conscious of how their sins have hurt God, and how He bore the thrusts of their sins willingly. In the context, God pleads with Judah to open their hearts, to embrace the conviction of sin God holds out to all humanity, but especially those whose gift is the full revelation of His glory. John rightly says that the sorrow of many on the day of Crucifixion was a manifestation of what Zechariah meant.

While there is an obvious literal meaning, it symbolizes something far more important. God had revealed Himself rather plainly in the Law, and then with utmost clarity in His Son, but this earthly nation rejected Him. They had done so in the past, which got them the Exile. They were too near rejecting the prophetic command to build the Second Temple. There is little left to do but offer one last look at what they could have if they would embrace Him. If they would turn and lament their sins, as they did on that awful day when they lamented the loss of Josiah at Megiddo, they can recover what was lost there that day, and far more. However, the price is

penitence not merely of their leaders, nor even every man, but women, too. Everyone old enough to be a child of the Law must confess their sins.

What genuine repentance could buy had not yet been seen on the earth.

Zechariah 13

The vision of the previous chapter continues, describing what God can do if His people take seriously the call to live in repentance. The blessings cannot be described literally, so Zechariah indulges in rich symbolic imagery of a new age with someone far greater than even David and Solomon ruling the people righteously.

This New Davidic Kingdom would receive from God a new kind of fountain that washes clean the lives of the people. If people want His holiness, He pours it out in abundance. That's how God does business with people who keep His Word. He'll wash away all the idolatry so completely that the idols' names will be forgotten. The people wouldn't even remember what it's like to be unfaithful. False prophets will become anathema socially. Their own parents would execute them out of shame.

Real prophets have a spirit to face testing and even death. Those false prophets who survive will go underground. They will deny ever having been one of the idolatrous scum who often claimed to be such great men, with all sorts of special authority. They'll quit wearing the prophetic garments and claim that they have always been poor farm slaves. The telltale scars on the chests and arms of false prophets from the heathen blood rituals would give them away, but they would insist it was something resulting from accidents, simple childish roughhousing. Their very lives will be at risk if any suspects their sordid past.

Where will this purifying fountain come from? God would provide His own blood sacrifice – His own Shepherd Son. The sheep will reject Him. When they kill the appointed Shepherd of His people, God will scatter the whole Covenant Nation. The majority of them would never return to the truth; the figure of thirds is not meant literally here in the midst of a parabolic vision. A substantial portion of Israel could be saved, but only by passing through the fire of cleansing suffering. So it is with all mankind once the Covenant of the Cross is established. We suffer here the opposition of the fallen world until our time is finished.

Zechariah 14

Zechariah has been presenting in deeply symbolic language what God could and would do for any people who make Him truly Lord of their lives. Had we dragged it all down to literalism, we would have missed the best part. Sadly, we know that the most influential teachers of the Scripture among the Jews did this very thing. Worse, we have today a vast horde of professing Christians who perpetuate this error. When reading this chapter, you must understand it as pure symbolism. There isn't any particular logical order; it is not sequential or chronological, but soaring far above mere words to drag our weak minds into the Realm of the Spirit to taste just a bit of the truth.

The Day of the Lord is coming. Even if Judah does lay claim to all these marvelous promises, there will finally come a day when it will all end for this earth. What can we say about the End of Time?

Characteristic of every prophetic description of that Last Day of the Lord, we are warned that mankind will rise up against the message of God. Jerusalem symbolizes the place on earth from which God's revelation flows out. His people were meant to be the incarnation of that message, but the point is the message itself. Whomever it is walking in His Word at The End will face a vigorous global attack. The world at large will finally be united in one thing, this final act of defiance against the Creator. They will attack and it will seem they have succeeded, because they are depicted as collecting the spoils of war. Roughly half of this People of God will die or be captured and abused in this seeming victorious attack. The rest will somehow manage to survive this siege.

Right when it seems all hope is lost for those who love the Lord, He will come to end the whole charade. Zechariah describes a scene where the mere touch of the Lord's feet on the earth would change the whole landscape. The mountain ridge east of Jerusalem would be parted like the sea at the Exodus. Don't get lost in the details of the imagery, because it seems the Lord allows His people to escape even as He rescues them in place. How would you explain something for which there is no equivalent human experience so far? This highway symbolizes how the Lord will gather the survivors at His coming. (The New Testament adds the concept that we'll be gathered to Him in the air.) Zechariah describes this scene in familiar terms, echoed in the words of other prophets. For example, he mentions the endless fountain flowing from the Temple to the seas east and west, seen previously in Ezekiel. There is also an end to the current cycle of day and night, because time will be no more.

In our minds we have to understand that he describes both the days after Christ and Eternity at the same time. What we experience in these Last Days brings a taste of Eternity, so the symbolism applies in some ways to both.

God will take the throne of all Creation and change everything; a new heaven and earth will replace the old. But in those final moments, he describes how the enemies of God's Word will destroy themselves. Because they rejected His Word, they will never make any more noise. Because they refused to see His truth, their eyes will be gone. They'll turn on each other, because their prey will be out of reach. Zechariah draws a picture of the rural residents of Judah coming in to attack the rear of the enemy formation. The enemy camp will be plundered, but all their lives, even their war animals, would die. At the moment of human triumph against God's revelation, it all comes apart on them.

Think of an age when God rules directly on the earth. How easy to live in a land where all is relatively flat and lush like the Lower Jordan Valley, yet the Dead Sea will be fresh water. It won't be necessary to discuss a Trinity any longer, because God Himself in His own form will be there, personally present in an Ultimate Reality no longer divided. There would be no way to resist His divine rule. The images of God punishing the nations who don't celebrate His reign is perhaps more easily understood as applying during this Messianic Age. Anyone unwilling to serve Him would receive none of His promised blessings. Instead, they'll face all the curses.

Those who do not celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, when the rituals symbolized the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, would be punished severely. Everything – every little detail of life, such as the decorative items on a horse’s bridle – would be stamped as Property of God Almighty. There would be nothing He doesn’t own directly, including us.

Were this meant literally, it would be a confusing jumble, not entirely consistent with other prophecies of the End Times. However, we rightly understand this as parable, symbolism of how God does things. The coming of Christ as Savior was down payment for Eternity. How would someone describe the joys of walking in the Spirit in the Last Days before the End of All Things?

Introduction to Malachi

Nothing in the text allows us to fix a date for Malachi’s prophecy. From his message we surmise that he was easily a century after Haggai and Zechariah, perhaps somewhat after the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah had worn off. We will assume here a date close to 400 BC. It seems obvious that the people of restored Judah had failed to hold onto the fire of his predecessors’ message. Whatever it was God offered as the great possibilities for obeying the Covenant never came because the people never obeyed.

Malachi 1

His name means “My Messenger.” The prophet briefly introduces his writing as a prophetic burden, a common Hebrew expression for a heavy responsibility from which he cannot escape.

His message begins framed as the people questioning the declarations of God. The Lord says He loves Judah. The people look at their circumstances and say they don’t feel much loved. The reply begins by comparing Judah, as the surviving representatives of Jacob, against those of his brother, Esau. God doesn’t have to justify His choices to anyone, but He chose Jacob against all the rules and laws of human custom at the time. When Babylon’s troops came rolling through, they captured Judah for exile, but nearly wiped Edom from history altogether. A tiny handful of survivors were driven out into the wastes. No buildings were left standing in Edom; the old town sites became the haunts of wild animals.

Judah got a chance to return, while the Edomites were struggling to rebuild their very existence. So the Edomites proudly boast that they’ll return and rebuild, too. God says it won’t matter, because He had plans to crush them again. We note a Bedouin nation drove them out of their homeland a century or so later.

Then the Lord asserts that the priesthood has treated Him with contempt. How does one state the utter stupidity of this? Their whole profession is glorifying Jehovah. They act so very innocent, asking how God could make this accusation. It wasn’t enough that they had reduced the whole thing to mundane routine, but they thought nothing of treating the Temple as a dumping ground for food no one would eat. God declares that He can find no excuse for them

even showing up in the Temple. Might as well seal the doors shut and pretend there is no God at all. Indeed, the Lord says He will respond as if they don't believe He exists.

Malachi 2

From the very beginning of the Covenant, there at the foot of Mount Sinai, the priests and Levites understood their position. At the very least, their meal ticket was in sincere and strict adherence to holiness and respect for God's glory. We struggle in our day to grasp the Ancient Hebrew mind of sincere commitment and personal devotion to God as a Person. They were equivalent to the royal bodyguard for Jehovah; the more literal Temple Guards were drawn from the Tribe of Levi. This was a high privilege, all the more so in God's personal covenant with the priests beginning with Phinehas (Numbers 25:12-13). Their divine appointment included the mission of teaching to Law to the rest of the nation (Deuteronomy 33:8-11).

Malachi warns that all their privileges would be taken away if they continued this creep toward what eventually became the Sadducees, a cynical and worldly elite who abused the people for their personal benefit. Their blessings would become curses. While some of the text here is in dispute, the thrust is obvious. They had turned their offices upside down and God threatens dire punishment for it. So He raises once again the image of the faithful man of Levi who, in every dispute, took God's side. This current crop late in the Restoration had not simply abandoned their duties, but took advantage of the situation to actively lead the people astray.

From at least as far back as Noah, God's fundamental requirement for mankind was social stability. The Law Covenants explained how to obtain that. Those covenants all assumed a tribal cohesion, considering disloyalty to kin one of the highest crimes possible. All the more so was this true with Israel, because God had adopted the entire nation as His own children. They were so blasé about this that it was incomprehensible. The Covenant of Moses was not a matter of mere DNA, but of commitment to the Laws of God. Any Gentile on this earth could become a full member of the Nation of Israel upon following the procedures and giving evidence of a sincere personal commitment to the Covenant. The people had been following the cynical attitude of the Levites by marrying foreign women still in their pagan commitments. This profaned the entire nation. It was the same careless flouting and flaunting grotesque sin that caused Phinehas to take action to stop the plague during the Exodus. It's the sort of sin that drags demon hordes inside the very camp of Jehovah's people.

If that weren't bad enough, the leading men were divorcing their first wives, trading them in for these sexy young pagan brides. While this seems heartless enough from our Western viewpoint, we miss something more important. This is more than simply abusing the old wife, but a slap in God's face. Once again, it brings in demonic presence that afflicts the entire community. This hardly promotes social stability. God treats divorce as a form of senseless violence. For this reason, He was rejecting their prayers and emotional displays at His altar.

Again we have an assertion from God that the people question. They don't understand how it is possible that they have wearied God with their profligate violence to His name. They have no concept of what God's blessings look like. Their complaint suggests that they see heathen sinners and reprobate Jews alike receiving *shalom* from the hand of God. They have blinded

themselves to the real difference, refusing to see the long-term results of violating the Covenant. They are silly enough to dare asking: “Where is God’s justice?”

Malachi 3

The previous chapter ends with the people daring to ask why they had not seen the justice of God, referring to the materialistic demands they imagined the Covenant promised. This was a century before the arrival of Hellenism, yet we see the stage already set for full-blown Pharisaism in the attitude Malachi confronted here. The most obvious element missing here is the timeless perspective of God’s revelation to the Hebrew people. There is no sense of the ancient legacy, no commitment to future generations. There is only the immediate “gimme” of arrogant fools seeking creature comforts. They evaluate the terms of the Covenant on mere profit and loss. What Jesus called “serving Mammon” is painfully obvious already.

People who cannot see beyond their immediate generation are trapped; they are utterly incapable of understanding God’s revelation. The Law of Moses makes no sense whatsoever without seeing the divine imperatives calling to you across several centuries. It’s also impossible to understand the Law if you fail to embrace the whole nation as your blood kin and resident aliens as potential family. This is all one team, not mere scenery, not competitors or threats. The widow in your village was your grandmother, the orphans your nephews and nieces. Allowing them to suffer was an inexcusable disgrace and personal insult to God. Getting this right was the very first and foremost expression of God’s justice. Allowing this to decay across generations was to desert utterly the entire purpose for calling them God’s Chosen.

God often ignores the human sense of time as a pointed lesson that we are wrong for clinging to it. Malachi begins this chapter by describing something that does not come about literally until some four centuries later. God speaks through Malachi as if this is just a few days away. That is a critical point: Learn to think long term, not just your own pitiful life span. At the same time, if the people could just recover their Ancient Hebrew outlook, perhaps it could be sooner. What He offers here is a personal visit. Would they be ready to receive Him as befitting His Lordship? If they take too long making ready, He’ll come at His own time, and it won’t be pleasant.

We all know that John the Baptist was the Messenger and his call to repentance was largely ignored. Thus, when God actually came in the guise of Jesus Christ, they all missed out on the blessing, only to catch the damnation of wrath a generation later as the existing political entity of Judah ended once and for all. Purifying a people like gold and silver could easily mean most of them consumed in the fire. He rattles off representative sins: efforts to bypass God’s revelation through divination, infidelity, breaking oaths, and denying their social responsibilities. All of these constitute ugly attacks on the social stability that the Law of Moses was supposed to encourage. That social stability and *shalom* was their means to God’s glory.

Malachi asserts that they need to repent, but they ask just what it means to return to God. He refers to His people as sneaking into His treasury and plundering His possessions. They can’t imagine what he is talking about. So he reminds them that they have refused to support the needy. A critical portion of the Mosaic Tithe Law was every third year, bringing the tithe of produce (crops and domestic animals) to the village storehouse. That collection was used to

support the Levites, the poor and nomads wandering through the area (Deuteronomy 14:22-29). While the people may have been obeying the other parts of tithing obligations, they were missing this one. For this cause, they would be suffering higher natural losses on par with the Gentiles who didn't know Jehovah. Repent and God would restrain such losses, and make them stand out as uniquely prosperous among the nations around them.

They have the gall to defame God, but deny they ever criticize Him. He warns that their phony ritual acts of mourning show no real sense of sorrow for sin. They don't see how it makes any difference, refusing to understand that the whole system of ritual sacrifice was precisely designed to cultivate a sense of the fallen human nature. Those sacrifices were supposed to call attention to how it feels to stand in the presence of God. If that doesn't make you tremble with fear, you deserve the full measure of His wrath in Hell.

Something calls the spirit of the prophet. Somewhere out there, some place away from this present company of agnostics, there had to be a few people who really and truly cared what God thought. He's not seeing a concrete vision within time and space reality, but a spiritual truth that God will never allow His revelation to go without a living witness. Somewhere there will always be a remnant of true believers who will associate together and seek God's face. He's keeping track of them, recognizing them as His kind of people. When the day comes that He calls the righteous to His final gathering, they'll be among the invited family guests. Meanwhile, there will be some unique sense in how He treats them in this life, too.

Malachi 4

All but bluntly stated, Malachi explains how the Presence of God polarizes everything. For those who cling to sin, His presence is like a fiery furnace, consuming everything and leaving nothing. For those who love Him and His revelation, the very same fire warms and brings healing. If we cling to His name, His Presence is ultimate freedom. Like lambs freshly shorn of their winter coat of wool, we can scamper about in the sheer joy of relief that sin has been purged. Our feet will stomp on the ashes of those consumed by His wrath.

We should observe here how the Hebrew language avoids assuming a fixed meaning to Malachi's image. It applied most certainly to the coming of Christ in this world. His presence in the flesh of Jesus brought life and freedom to those whose spirits longed for the revelation of God's glory. At the same time, it hardened in sin those bound up in fleshly concerns. Yet again, in That Final Day, this might seem more literal in what we might see, with His wrath blasting evil into oblivion and bringing the rest of us into Eternity. The difference in human fate is whether they belong to Him and cling to His Word.

So He calls to mind again the revelation through Moses at Mount Sinai ("Horeb"). We are also reminded that Jesus said those who studied the Law of Moses would find it taught about Him as the Messiah. Just to make sure we stand ready, the Lord mentions again that He would send a prophet in the Spirit of Elijah, whom we know was John the Baptist. Perhaps we have a hard time realizing how the ministry of Jesus could be so terrifying, but we note that those who rejected Him eventually were destroyed. That is, His death on the Cross was the ritual end of the Covenant of Moses. Those who did not cling to Christ and follow Him into the Covenant of

Blood and Grace were left with the dead covenants of old. The stinking corpse of literal Israel lay rotting in the sun until Rome swept it away. Meanwhile, the entire focus of God's dealings with men on this earth moved to the New Israel. That was the terrible end of those who rejected His message.

Christ is the full embodiment of revelation. Truth has always been a person, impossible to render as a mere proposition. Malachi foresees that clinging to the Living Truth is a matter of getting to know the mind of the Son of God. Jesus brought to life a new nation and a new Household of Faith ("fathers and children"). Wherever and whenever in this time-space continuum people stand in His Son and live His Laws of the Spirit, God's wrath serves to purify, not destroy. The difference is whether we cling to sin or to Him.