

AN OUTLINE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Knowledge of the Old Testament is important to understanding the New Testament (and vice versa) and yet there is a widespread ignorance of the Old Testament amongst Christians today (part of a widespread ignorance of much of the whole Bible in many quarters). To many people, the Old Testament is a closed book.

Other Christians pick helpful passages out of the Old Testament without any knowledge of the context or the overall story of God's dealings with the chosen people from whom the Messiah came.

This section of the website is aimed at helping rectify this. It has summaries of all the books, with a certain amount of background, interpretation, explanation and a few simple diagrams.

The problems and questions raised by the Old Testament have not been avoided. In many cases they have been briefly addressed. However there is another section of this website on *The Nature of God in the Old Testament* which deals in more depth with such questions, particularly about the genocide said to have been carried out by the Israelites on the Canaanites.

It is hoped that this Outline will encourage people to read the OT or to read it with more understanding, and so to understand the New Testament better.

Tony Higton

Understanding the Old Testament

Here a few guidelines:

1. Remember that the Old Testament is an Ancient Near Eastern book, written thousands of years ago by Ancient Near Eastern people. The fact of divine inspiration does not mean that the cultural setting is ignored. God was, in the first place, communicating with Ancient Near Eastern people using, language, concepts and conventions which they would understand. Just as God accommodated in a major way to human understanding through the incarnation, so God accommodates to human understanding in his written word.
2. So we should not expect the Old Testament to be written in a polite middle class English way, with nothing to shock or puzzle polite middle class English people!
3. The prophets and others thunder forth with language and threats which we might find difficult to cope with. Ancient Near Eastern people would have coped better with this, although still got the message about judgment etc.
4. A clear example of God accommodating to human thinking and behaviour is when he asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. How could the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ask such a dreadful thing? The answer is that, on the one hand God was accommodating to Abraham as an Ancient Near Eastern man who, coming from a pagan background, would not have a problem in principle with human sacrifice. The surrounding culture accepted it. In this context God was asking him to be willing to make a huge sacrifice to show his faith and allegiance to God. On the other hand, as the story indicates, God never intended that Abraham should actually reach the point of killing Isaac. It really does not seem possible to cope with this story without understanding that God was accommodating to a very sinful culture in order, gradually to redeem that culture. Similarly, polygamy and men having concubines were tolerated by God, because it was accepted in the ancient culture.
5. A big issue for Christians in the Old Testament is the 'genocide' of the Canaanites – the killing not just of military men, but of women and children. This is commanded in God's name by godly leaders such as Moses and the OT states sometimes that God explicitly commanded it. This is not the place to expand on that, but I have done so in *The Nature of God in the Old Testament*. The one scholarly explanation which makes sense to me is that the ancient Israelites practised "Ancient Near Eastern Exaggeration Rhetoric" which was widespread in Near Eastern culture. It is likely, therefore that descriptions of 'genocide' were exaggerated and didn't literally happen. This was not regarded as lying but as an acceptable and readily-understood convention. Similarly, we ourselves might say that our football team "annihilated" the opposing team, but we don't mean it literally!

6. However, although God tolerated these things in Ancient Isarelite culture, he was gradually revealing more of his character and requirements, through the process called “progressive revelation,” at a pace which Ancient Near Eastern people could cope with.
7. The other thing to remember is that sometimes Ancient Near Eastern people communicated through symbolism and folk stories which, though not literal, can convey truth. This applies, for example, to some material in the early chapters of Genesis.

GENESIS - the Beginnings (Chapters 1-11)

SYMBOLISM: The early chapters of Genesis are as full of concentrated teaching as the epistles of the New Testament. The creation stories are not intended to be a scientific account. The main interest of the whole Bible is redemption, not history or science. Christians differ as to how much symbolism there is in these early chapters and even some later chapters. And it is important to realize that to say a passage is symbolical does not mean downgrading it. God's word can be enshrined in symbolism as, for example, the poetry of the Psalms. God is not literally a rock but calling him a rock is very meaningful to us. Jesus' parables may not describe actual events but they are God's Word. Throughout this summary, from time to time, possible natural explanations are given of what seem to be miraculous events. This is not in any way to deny God's miraculous intervention but rather to give options. For example, some miracles may not have been supernatural events in themselves, but may have been miracles of timing, i.e. they are important events which happened just at the right time to provide for the people of God.

CHAPTERS 1-2

The majestic description of creation in Chapter 1 is very brief and orderly. Ten times we read "And God said"; eight times God commands new aspects of creation to appear; seven times it was so and God saw that it was good. Here is a summary of some of the teaching of these chapters:

A. About God

1. **God is personal**, not some impersonal force. He speaks etc. (1:3).
2. **God is one** This rules out the polytheism ("belief in many gods") of other ancient creation accounts. Interestingly, though, the Hebrew word for God is plural ("Elohim") yet the verbs associated with this word are singular (1:1). Many have seen a suggestion of the doctrine of the Trinity, God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, revealed in the New Testament.
3. **God is distinct from creation**. He existed before creation (matter is not eternal) and is clearly distinct from it (1:1). This rules out pantheism which says God is creation and creation is God. The sun, moon and stars which have often been worshipped as gods are mere lights (1:14).
4. **God is good** He is loving and just in his dealings with humans, not an arbitrary dictator (2:18)

B. About Human Beings.

1. **Human beings are dignified beings:** They are the climax of creation, made in the image of God (1:26), the final act of creation (1:27). This contrasts with other ancient creation stories which see humans as an afterthought. Verse 27 is the first poetry in the Old Testament and this is perhaps an indication of God's joy at the creation of man. Male and female are equal before God (1:27-30).
2. **Human beings are authoritative beings** with the rule over nature. This does not justify human exploitation of nature. We should have respect for it and be conservationists.
3. **Human beings are sexual beings:** The norm is marriage (although some are called to a single life, being given the gift of singleness Mt. 19:10-11, in order to major on the Lord's work - 1 Cor. 7:32-35). Sex and marriage are holy gifts of God (1:28; 2:24). Marriage is a 'creation ordinance' whereby a man officially leaves his parents before being united with his wife (2:24). Therefore the marriage relationship takes priority over relationships with close relatives such as parents. God's intention was monogamy - marriage to one partner for life. They become one "flesh."
4. **Human beings are spiritual beings:** They receive God's breath of life (2:7). This, like their creation in the image of God, shows the intimacy of relationship God intended to have with humanity.
5. **Human beings are industrious beings:** God intended them to work (2:15).

6. **Human beings are responsible beings:** They have freedom to decide whether to obey God or not (2:17).
7. **Human beings are social beings:** They need a companion. Man is incomplete without woman.
The primary purpose of marriage, including the sexual relationship, is not only procreation but companionship and fulfilment (2:18-25). (Consequently contraception is not wrong). Every human being needs human company. Animals are not sufficient companions (2:20).
8. **Human beings are aesthetic beings:** ('possessing a sense of beauty'). God put Adam and Eve in a beautiful park called Eden which probably comes from the Hebrew word for 'delight' or 'bliss' (2:15). Humans should therefore live in a beautiful environment.

C. The Days of Creation

Chapter 1 makes it clear that creation did not happen instantaneously, but in stages. The earth was "formless and empty" (1:2). In days 1-3 God gave it form or structure, i.e. he created a habitat. In days 4-6 he filled it with creatures and man. There are parallels between days 1-3 and 4-6:

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| 1. Light | 4. Sun, moon, stars |
| 2. Sky | 5. Birds (and fish) |
| 3. Land and vegetation | 6. Animals and humans (vegetation for food) |

There is increasing detail as the creation of humans – the climax - is reached.

But how are we to understand the days in this chapter? There are several theories:

1. **The Age-Day Theory** i.e. that each "day" is actually a long period of time. On 65 occasions in the Old Testament the Hebrew word for "day" means a long period of time. However, the reference to "morning and evening" suggests they were literal, 24 hour days. Also, although there are remarkable parallels between science and Genesis, yet there are problems. One main difficulty is that light is created three days before the sun. It has been suggested that there was a heavy mist for days 1-3 and on day 4 the sun *appeared* through the mist.
2. **The Gap Theory**, i.e. Genesis 1:1 describes the original creation of the world and verse 2 describes how, after a long period of time, the earth *became* formless and empty. So Genesis 1:3 onwards describes a more recent re-creation. The word "was" in v.2 could possibly mean "became." However this appears to be putting far too much weight on a single word.
3. **The Days of Revelation Theory**, i.e. God revealed the information in Genesis to Moses in six days. So the days have nothing to do with Creation, they are simply the time period during which Moses received his visions or revelations.
4. **The Flood theory**, i.e. creation took place in literally six days and the flood accounts for all the fossil life which scientists think is millions of years old. This view requires belief that the earth is only a few thousand years old and conflicts with the scientific evidence.
5. **The Pseudo-Antique Theory**, i.e. God created the world a few thousand years ago but he made it look as if it had been developing for millions of years. This would surely involve God in deception.
6. **The Theological Theory**, i.e. the days are simply a literary or teaching device to divide up the teaching, and are not to be taken literally. They are no more significant than my dividing up the teaching of Genesis 1-2 into several points. They are conveying theological truth (such as I have drawn out) in a symbolic context, cf. the parables. Christians who adopt this view accept that evolution took place under the guidance of God. This is the mainstream view amongst Christians.

D. Evolution

This is not the place to go into detail. See the articles under "Does evolution make God irrelevant?" in the Apologetics section of this website.

CHAPTER 3

Everything that God created was very good (1:31) but Satan (a rebel angelic being), appearing in the form of a serpent, spoils it through man. Sin is portrayed in terms of eating forbidden fruit. Death is seen as alien to human beings. It is not the original intention of God, but is the penalty of sin.

Satan:

- sowed doubt about God's command (3:1)
- contradicts God's word (3:4)
- slanders God as a restrictive, spoilsport (3:5)

After all this the fruit looked even more tempting (3:6).

The results of sin were:

- Guilt and shame (3:7-10) (Notice God clothed them 3:21. Having lost their innocence, man and woman should not be naked in public, including being involved in naturism or nudism).
- Spoilt relationship between man and wife (3:16).
- Spoilt relationship with nature (3:17-19).
- Spoilt relationship with God (3:10, 23-24).
- Death (3:22).

CHAPTER 4

Adam's son Cain was violently jealous of his brother. Abel's animal sacrifices to God were accepted because of his faith but Cain's offerings of crops were not. So Cain murdered Abel - the first murder. This was the ultimate rejection of the dignity of human life as taught in chapters 1 and 2. Cain was cursed by God. His successors learnt to play and enjoy music and to work in iron and bronze (vv. 21-22). But wickedness increased (vv. 23-24).

CHAPTER 5

The family trees or genealogies in the ancient world were often selective. One theory about the great ages of people in this chapter is that the name refers not only to the individual but to the tribe descending from the individual.

CHAPTERS 6-10

Who were the "sons of God" (6:2) who married the daughters of men? There are several suggestions:

1. **Royal figures:** i.e. kings often were regarded as gods or associated with gods. Maybe they were evil kings or princes.
2. **Godly men:** i.e. maybe godly descendants of Seth intermarried with sinful women who descended from Cain.
3. **Angels:** This is the normal meaning of "sons of God." Some say that rebellious angels (demons) were craving for a body (as the Gospels teach) and so were seeking to possess the bodies of women (see 1 Peter 3:19-20; 2 Peter 2:4-6; Jude 6).

God now regretted having made humans because they had become so evil. However, Noah who was pleasing to God, was appointed to build the ark and so to save from drowning, not only his family, but animals too.

Folk tales of a great flood are worldwide. The ark was about 450 feet by 76 feet by 45 feet high. It had three decks. The tonnage of the ark has been calculated as some 13,960 tons, comparable to some large modern ships.

Noah had to take a pair of each ceremonially unclean animal (6:19-20) and seven 'clean' animals (7:2-3). The extra would be needed for sacrifices after the flood.

Many Christians believe the Flood only covered the then-known world and wasn't universal. Universal language is used in the Old Testament to refer to a limited area (see 41:54, 57). The geological evidence is said to support a limited flood.

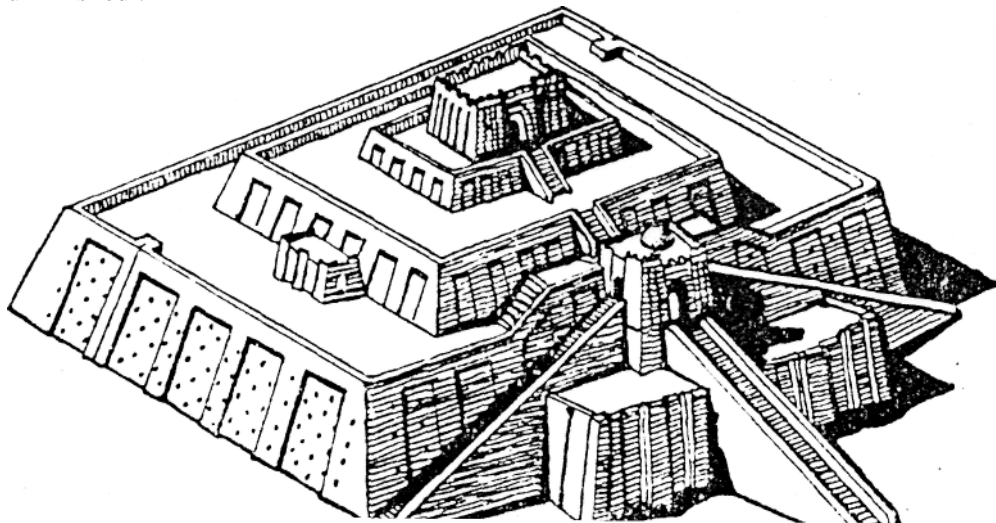
Noah offered sacrifice to God after the flood subsided and the Lord made a covenant with Noah never again to destroy the world by flood (8:20-9:11). The rainbow became a sign of this covenant (9:12-17).

Noah had three sons: Japheth, the father of the Indo-European peoples, Shem, the father of the Semitic peoples and

Ham, the father of the African peoples and Canaanites. Ham's son, Canaan was cursed because of his father's wrong reaction to Noah lying naked in a drunken stupor (9:20-27). Some extreme fundamentalists have said this means black people are condemned to be inferior to others. Such a racist attitude is certainly not substantiated by this chapter and is contradicted by Scripture. The curse is purely on the Canaanites who were Caucasian not black.

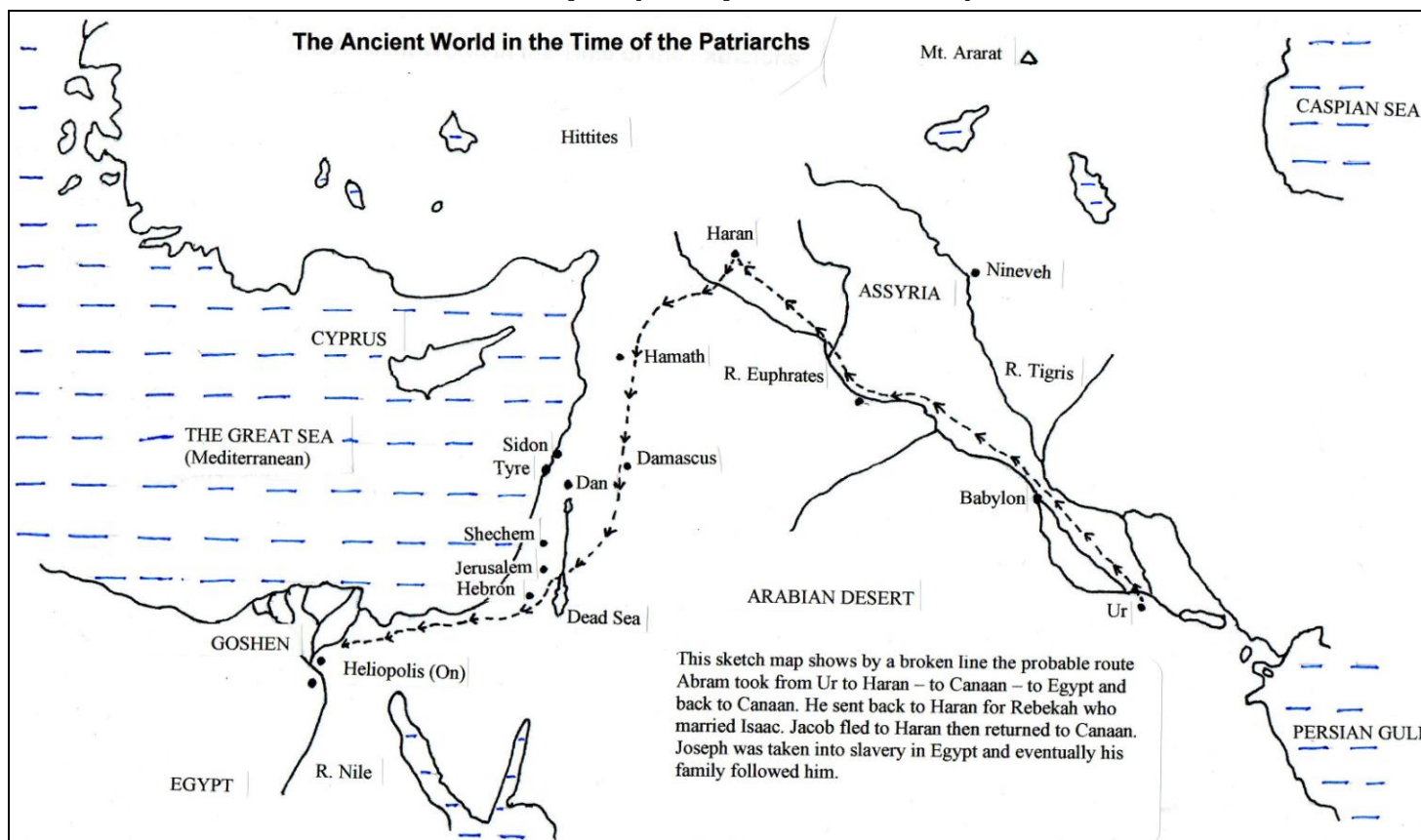
CHAPTER 11

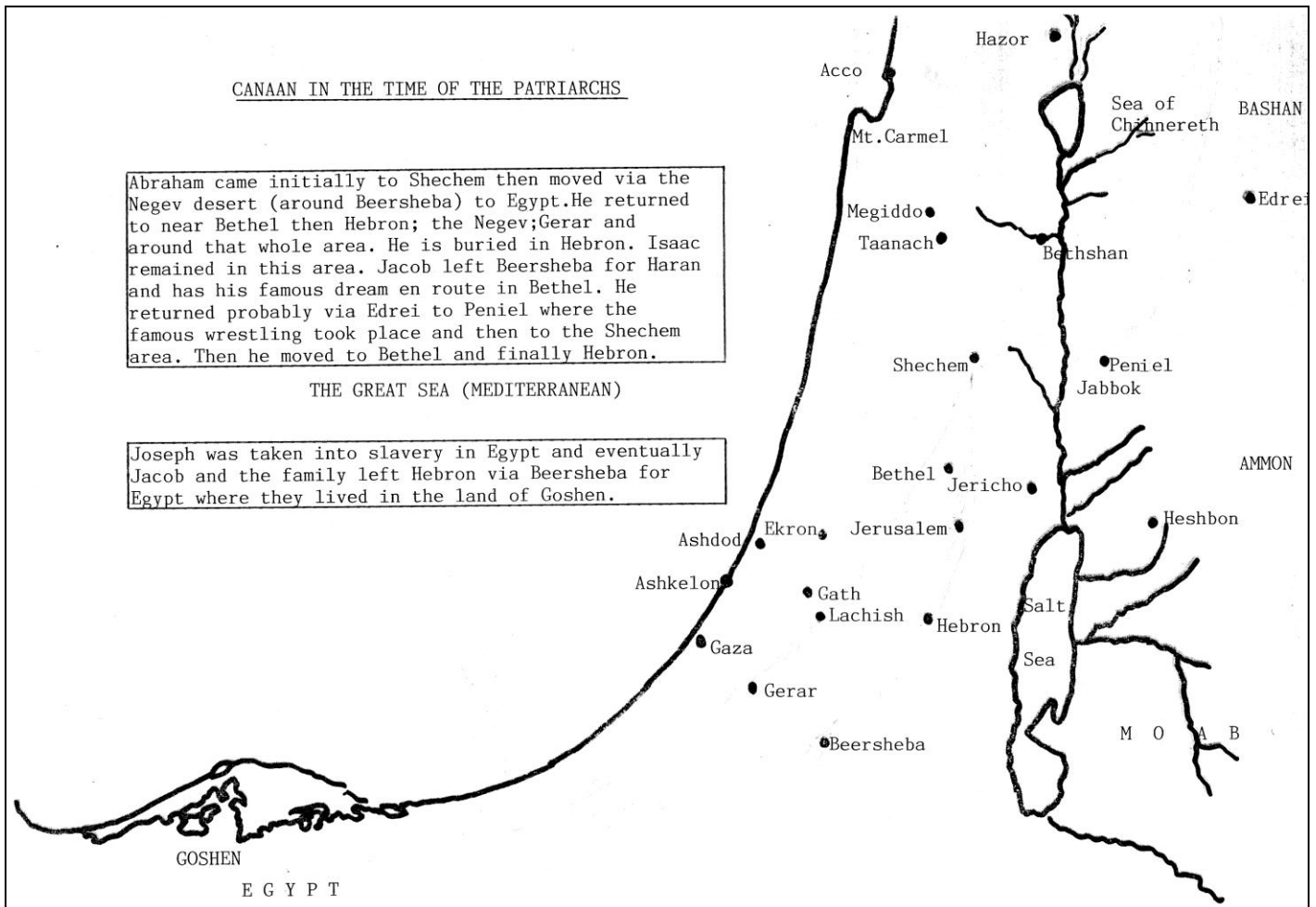
Later in history in the plain of Shinar men built a huge multi-storey temple tower (or ziggurat) to reach heaven. God judges this rebellion against him by confusing the people with language barriers and the Tower of Babel remains unfinished .



A ziggurat

Genesis - Abraham to Joseph (Chapters 12 - 50)





Abraham

Abraham's father came from Ur on the river Euphrates in S. Babylonia (Iraq) to Haran in S.E. Turkey where he died. God commanded Abram (as he was then called) to leave for Canaan. He made Abram a seven fold promise (12: 2-3).

- i. To make him a great nation
- ii. To bless him
- iii. To make his name great
- iv. To make him a blessing
- v. To bless those who bless him
- vi. To curse those who curse him
- vii. To bless the world through him.

Here we have God's plan to redeem the world through a chosen people. It was to be fulfilled through Christ. In spite of the Jewish rejection of the messiah God has kept his promise to Abraham. So:

- i. Abraham was justified by faith (Rom.4:2-3, 9, 13, 18-22; Gal.3:6, 8).
- ii. He received circumcision as a sign of this (Rom. 4:11).
- iii. Christ is the 'seed' of Abraham (Gal. 3:16-20).
- iv. We believers (Jewish or Gentile) are the spiritual children of Abraham (Rom. 4:11-12, 16; Gal. 3:7, 9).
- v. We receive the blessing of Abraham through Christ (Gal. 3:14).

Abram obeyed God's command to come to Shechem where God promised to give the land to his descendants. During a famine he went to Egypt for food. He lied to Pharaoh (the Egyptian king) that Sarai was not his wife so that Pharaoh would not kill him to take her as his bride. When the lie was discovered Abram left Egypt and returned to Bethel with Lot, his nephew. They split up (Chapter 13) and Lot went to the fertile plain near the Dead Sea where the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were. Abram returned to Hebron.

Lot was captured by some warring kings (Chapter 14) and Abram pursued them to Dan, defeated them and chased them north of Damascus. On his return he met Melchizedek the priest-king from Salem (later Jerusalem) and gave him tithes. God promised Abram many descendants (Chapter 15) but Sarai was barren. God made a solemn covenant (agreement) sealed in the blood of animal sacrifices that the land would belong to Abraham's descendants but first they would suffer 400 years slavery in a foreign country.

Abram and Sarai were impatient for children and so, according to custom, he decided to have a son, Ishmael, by his slave girl Hagar (Chapter 16). Sarai ensured that Hagar (now pregnant) ran away, but she soon returned. Still Abram and Sarai waited. God renewed the covenant (Chapter 17) and said that circumcision was to be the sign of belonging to the "covenant people." The birth of Isaac was foretold by angels (Chapter 18) but Abram and Sarai could not believe it. Abram was renamed Abraham ("the father of many").

Sodom and Gomorrah were very wicked. Homosexual practice (sodomy) was rife. Lot and his family lived there. God revealed he was going to destroy the cities and Abraham prayed that even if there were only 10 righteous people there God would not carry out the destruction. But there were less than that. Two angels in human form visited the city and stayed with Lot (Chapter 19). The men of the city demanded homosexual relations with them. So because there were less than 10 righteous people judgment came. Lot and his family escaped as the cities were destroyed perhaps by an earthquake and explosions of gas. The area was rich in petroleum, bitumen, salt and sulphur. Lot's wife deliberately lagged behind and was overcome with the disaster and the rain of salt. The cities now lie below the Dead Sea.

Abraham went to Gerar (Chapter 20) and again lied about Sarai to King Abimelech of Gerar. Isaac followed this example of his father with a later Abimelech (Chapter 26). In c.1900 BC Isaac was born and Sarah sent Hagar and Ishmael away (Chapter 21). When Isaac was about 16 (Chapter 22) God tested Abraham to see if he would sacrifice him (human sacrifice was not uncommon) at Mount Moriah (the site of the later temple in Jerusalem and near the site of Calvary). Abraham reached the point of raising the knife to kill Isaac when God stopped him, pointing out a trapped ram to be sacrificed instead.

HUMAN SACRIFICE: As stated in the Introduction "Understanding the Old Testament" God was accommodating to Abraham as an Ancient Near Eastern man from a pagan background which accepted human sacrifice. God was asking him to be willing to make a huge sacrifice to show his faith and allegiance. However, God never intended that Abraham should actually reach the point of killing Isaac.

Sarah died and Abraham bought the cave of Machpelah (through typical oriental bargaining) as a burial place (Chapter 23).

Jacob

In later years Abraham sent his servant back to the Haran area to bring his niece Rebekah for Isaac to marry (Chapter 24). Rebekah gave birth to twin boys Esau (the first born) and Jacob (Chapter 25). Esau later sold his privileges as first born to Jacob in exchange for a meal when he was very hungry. (Such a sale could happen in those days). With Rebekah's help Jacob tricked his father into thinking he was Esau (Isaac was blind) and so received the firstborn's blessing (Chapter 27). Consequently, Esau hated Jacob, and Jacob fled from Beersheba to safety in Haran. On the way he had the dream about a ladder up to heaven and God renewed with Jacob the covenant first made with Abraham (Chapter 28).

Jacob reached his uncle Laban's home (Chapter 29) and fell in love with his cousin Rachel. Laban tricked him into working for him but Jacob got his own back by cheating Laban out of the best of his flocks (Chapter 30). Jacob and his family left for Canaan (Chapter 31) and prepared anxiously to meet Esau (Chapter 32). The night before the meeting the Lord appeared to Jacob in angelic form and wrestled with him. Eventually Jacob's hip was wrenched. Jacob asked the angel for a blessing and he was given a new name "Israel" which means "he struggles with God." Fortunately for Jacob Esau had forgiven him (Chapter 33).

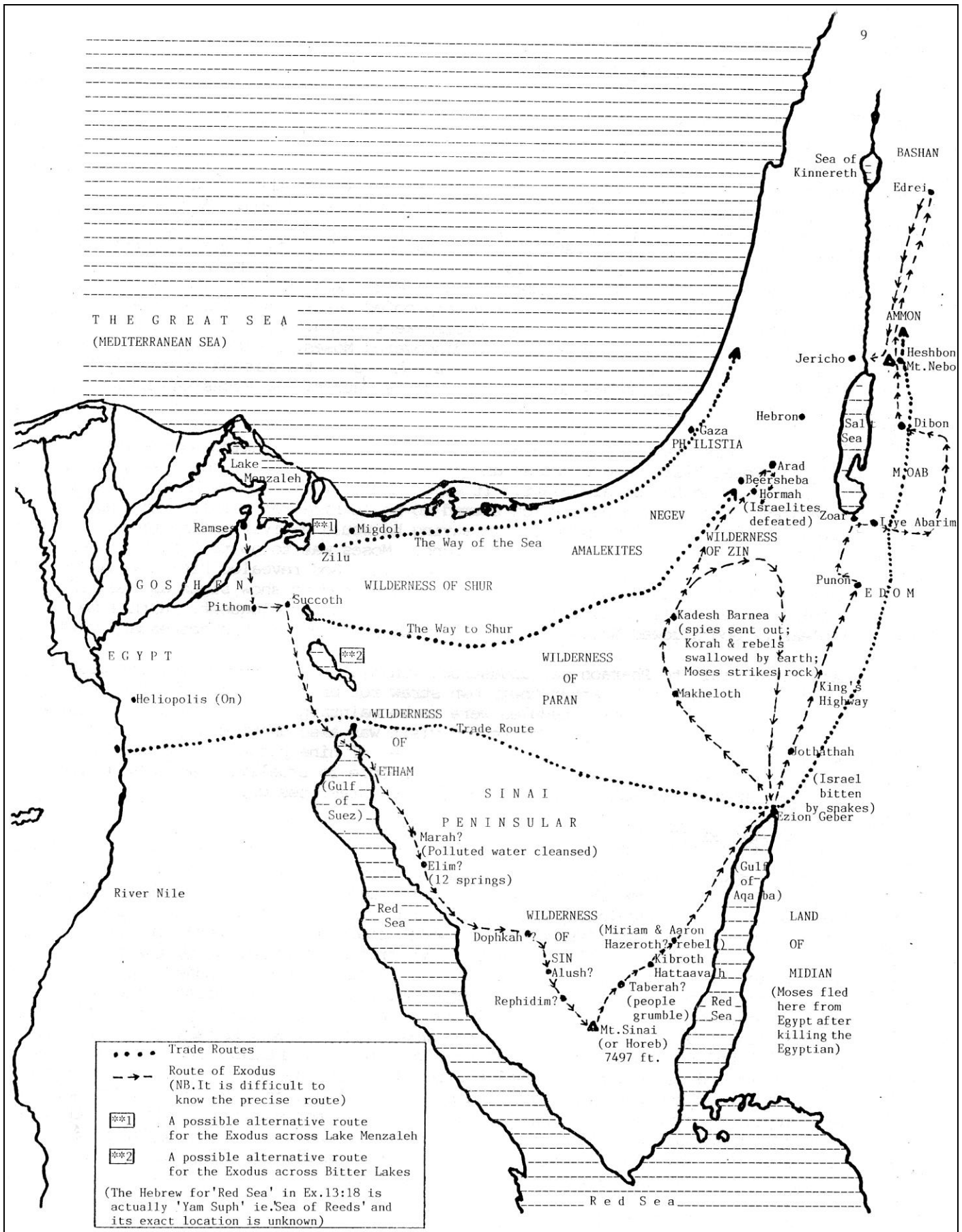
Jacob (Israel) had twelve sons (Chapter 35) Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Benjamin, Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher. Levi's descendants became ministers in the Temple. Aaron (a descendant of Levi) became high priest and his family and descendants became priests. Joseph's two sons - Manasseh and Ephraim replaced him in the list. The families of the twelve became the tribes of the nation of Israel, but the Levites had no territory.

Joseph

At 17 Joseph was Jacob's favourite but was despised by his brothers (Chapter 37). He had dreams implying his brothers would bow down to him one day which increased their hatred. So they planned to kill him, but instead sold him to slave traders and told Jacob he was killed by a wild animal. Joseph was sold to Potiphar, captain of Pharaoh's guard. Potiphar's wife wanted to commit adultery with Joseph (Chapter 39) and, when he refused, claimed he assaulted her and so Joseph was imprisoned. Two years later Pharaoh had strange dreams of seven thin cows eating seven fat cows and seven thin ears of corn eating seven fat ears. No-one could interpret (Chapter 41). Then someone remembered Joseph's reputation as an interpreter of dreams. He told Pharaoh that the dreams indicated a great famine would come and preparations must be made. So Joseph was made Pharaoh's second in command. Around this time Isaac died (c.1886 BC). When the famine arrived, food was available in Egypt and Jacob heard of this (Chapter 42). He sent ten of Joseph's brothers to buy some grain. Joseph recognised them but they did not know him. Eventually, after making them suffer some anxiety (Chapters 43-45), he revealed his identity. Jacob then agreed to take the whole family down to Egypt (Chapter 46). They were welcomed by Pharaoh and went to live in Goshen (Chapters 47-50 – c. 1700 BC). Jacob died and Joseph reassured his brothers he would still treat them well. Joseph died (c. 1550 BC) having reaffirmed that God would lead his brothers into the promised land. He asked them to carry his bones and bury them in Canaan.

(NB. Until the time of King David dates are approximate).

Exodus and Numbers: history Egypt to Canaan



Exodus

1. Moses (chap.1-7)

Jacob's family grew and was fast becoming a nation within the nation of Egypt. Then a new Pharaoh came to the throne who had not known Joseph. He was afraid that the people of Jacob (Israel) may revolt against Egypt, so he enslaved them to build two great store cities Pithom and Rameses. But still the Israelites grew in numbers. So Pharaoh ordered the midwives to kill all male Israelite babies. When Moses was born his parents hid him for three months in a waterproofed basket in reeds at the edge of the River Nile (chap. 2). His sister Miriam kept watch. One day Pharaoh's daughter came to bathe in the river and discovered Moses. Quick-witted Miriam offered to find a nurse for the baby, as Pharaoh's daughter wished to keep him. Quite naturally Miriam chose her mother as Moses' nurse. So Moses was brought up in Pharaoh's court.

As an adult, Moses saw an Egyptian beating an Israelite. Thinking no-one was watching, he killed the Egyptian and buried him. But he had been seen, so had to flee up to the Sinai desert. It was at Mount Sinai (or Horeb) that Moses - now a shepherd - saw a bush which seemed to be on fire yet wasn't being destroyed (chap. 3). Here, God spoke to him saying he would deliver Israel from slavery and lead them into the Promised Land. Moses was to go to Pharaoh about this. He protested he was not able to achieve it. God revealed his holy name -Yahweh or Jehovah - told Moses what to say and promised to show signs and wonders to help. Moses still protested he was inadequate and not eloquent. With some displeasure God allowed Moses to have his brother, Aaron, as his spokesman (chap. 4).

Their first visit to Pharaoh was disastrous (chap.5). He refused to let the people go and instead made them gather their own straw for brick making instead of having it provided. Yet the work schedules were to be maintained. This caused the Israelites to grumble about Moses. The second visit was also unsuccessful in spite of some miraculous signs (chap.7). So began a series of nine plagues which were a judgment on Egypt for enslaving God's chosen people so cruelly. Each plague followed yet another refusal by Pharaoh to let the Israelites go.

2. The plagues in Egypt (chap.8-10)

The Nile - regarded by Egyptians as a god and heart of the nation's economy - was "turned to blood." Some scholars hold that the plagues may have been natural events which were miraculously intensified and timed. For example, they hold that the Nile being turned to blood was a reference to the time each year when red clay is washed down from Ethiopia polluting the Nile. It is called the 'red Nile' by the Arabs. The polluted water flooded over the various other water supplies (7:19). This pollution killed the fish. The frogs (also associated with Egypt's gods), driven from the river banks by rotting fish, entered houses for shelter (chap. 8). First gnats, then flies bred from the carcasses of the fish and frogs and this caused a plague (perhaps anthrax) in the land which affected man and beast (chap. 9). Hail and thunderstorms destroyed the crops of those who did not heed the warning. The wind blew in a plague of locusts from Ethiopia which stripped Egypt of its greenstuff (chap. 10). For three days the light of the sun was blotted out (possibly an unusually severe khamsin - annual sandstorm). In all this the Israelites were unharmed. Still Pharaoh kept "hardening his heart."

Scholars have pointed out that the plagues were seen as judgments on Egypt's gods. The Nile was worshipped. The Egyptian goddess of childbirth had the head of a frog. The sky goddess was depicted as a cow (plague 3 killed livestock). The storm god Seth was associated with the hail and thunder. The sun god Re was blotted out. Yahweh claimed the firstborn yet the god of the dead was Osiris. The plagues would have been seen as Yahweh being superior to those gods.

3. The Passover (chap.11-13)

At this point, God announced the final judgment (chap. 11). He told his people to ask for clothes and jewellery from the Egyptians. (Some of this would be used as materials for the portable sanctuary they later made). God announced that at midnight all the first-born in Egypt would die. A new religious feast was instituted - The Passover (chap. 12). They were to sacrifice a lamb and eat the meat with unleavened bread (to remind them of the hasty departure) and bitter herbs (to remind them of bitter slavery). The meal was to be eaten in a state of readiness to leave in a hurry. Some of the blood of the lamb was to be daubed on the door posts of their houses. Seeing the blood, the plague would pass over them (hence 'The Passover'). The plague struck and the Egyptian first-born died. Since then the first-born of the Israelites have been regarded as belonging to God. An offering has to be made to God to buy them back ('redeem'

them) (chap. 13).

KILLING OF THE FIRSTBORN: There is, of course, a moral issue about the killing of innocent Egyptian children. It is at least possible that the death of the Egyptian firstborn was due to natural causes, although with very significant timing? Scholars say it could have been caused by eating grain which had been contaminated by poisonous fungi which thrive in damp conditions. This causes internal bleeding. The first-born sons would have been fed first and would have died almost instantly. The Israelites lived in Goshen more or less isolated from the bulk of the Egyptian population, which tended to concentrate more to the south and west, because shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians (Gen 46:34). Clearly, it must have been bad enough to convince Pharaoh finally to let the Israelites go. But, if it was a natural cause, how could it have been *all* the firstborn of Egypt who died? Scholars have pointed out that the account of the plagues (although describing factual events) was written for a theological purpose and quite extravagant language is used to describe the effect of the plagues (compare the Ancient Near Eastern Exaggeration Rhetoric mentioned in the introduction “Understanding the Old Testament.”). This was not regarded as dishonest but was accepted in Ancient Near Eastern culture. For more on this see “*The Nature of God in the Old Testament*” which is a more academic paper.

4. The Exodus (chap.14-19)

So Israel made its exodus from Egypt after 400 years slavery, as foretold to Abraham. They did not take the direct route to Canaan as they would have run into the Philistines near Gerar. Instead they went south from Goshen. A pillar of cloud led them by day and a pillar of fire by night. The route they took is a little uncertain, but very soon they reached the sea and then realised the Egyptians were pursuing them (chap. 14). Whether this took place very near Goshen, further north near the Mediterranean or south at the Red Sea proper, we do not know. The people panicked, but as Moses stretched out his hand, a strong east wind blew the waters back sufficiently to allow Israel to cross. The sea here is called ‘the reed sea’ i.e. it may have been reedy salt marshes normally covered with water. A strong wind linked with an ebb tide could have dried the area up long enough for the lightly armed Israelites to cross. The Egyptian chariots would sink, axles break, panic occur and the water return with disastrous results. On this understanding, it was a wonderful miracle of timing. However, 14:22, 29 refer to the waters being a “wall.” This could be metaphorical. The word is so used in Ezra 9:9 meaning “protection.”

Israel then travelled down the west coast of the Sinai Peninsular, stopping at Marah where the waters were undrinkable (chap. 15). The people grumbled, but God led Moses to throw a tree into the waters. We don’t know what the tree was. Modern Arabs use a barberry bush in this way and there are other parallels. Maybe it was a pungent or aromatic shrub whose flavour covered the mineral taste of the water.

On they went via Elim towards Mount Sinai (Horeb) (chap. 16). Again the people grumbled about lack of food. In the evenings flocks of quails flew over. Twice a year the quail migrates over this area. Sometimes the birds are so exhausted they have to rest for a day or two and they can be caught by hand. This is a miracle of timing. In the morning there was “manna” on the ground. Some scholars think this may have been the Arabic ‘man’, a globular substance exuded by two types of scale insects, living on the twigs of the tamarisk. It contains natural sugars and pectin and is found only in the south-west part of the Sinai Peninsular after the rains of spring. The substance is collected by ants when the sun becomes hot. However, attractive though this explanation is, it does not seem to fit the facts. None was available on the Sabbath. But the Sabbath was the only day when a previous day’s supply didn’t go bad, 16:19-17.

At Rephidim the people grumbled because of lack of water (chap. 17). At the Lord's command, Moses struck the rock and water flowed out of it. To this day, it is known that water sources in the rocks of this area can become clogged up by a ‘plug’ formed out of the salts in the water. To remove such a ‘plug’ releases water.

The Amalekites attacked the Israelites. Joshua went off to fight them, whilst Moses remained behind to pray. Whilst he held his hands up the Israelites were winning. When he lowered them, the Amalekites prevailed. So Aaron and Hur supported Moses’ arms. After this, Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, strongly advised him to delegate his responsibilities of administering the law for the people (chap. 18).

Eventually, Mount Sinai (or Horeb) was reached (chap. 19). God said to Moses he would make Israel his special people if they obey him. With due religious preparations, they drew near to the mountain. The mountain appeared like a violent active volcano as God spoke to Moses, warning the people not to come up it. This was the setting in which

God revealed the law to Moses.

(Note: Possible natural methods by which some miracles took place are mentioned here. If they are correct this does not alter the fact that a miracle happened. The timing, the unusual sequence and connection of events are all evidence of God's intervention).

5. The golden calf (chap. 32-34)

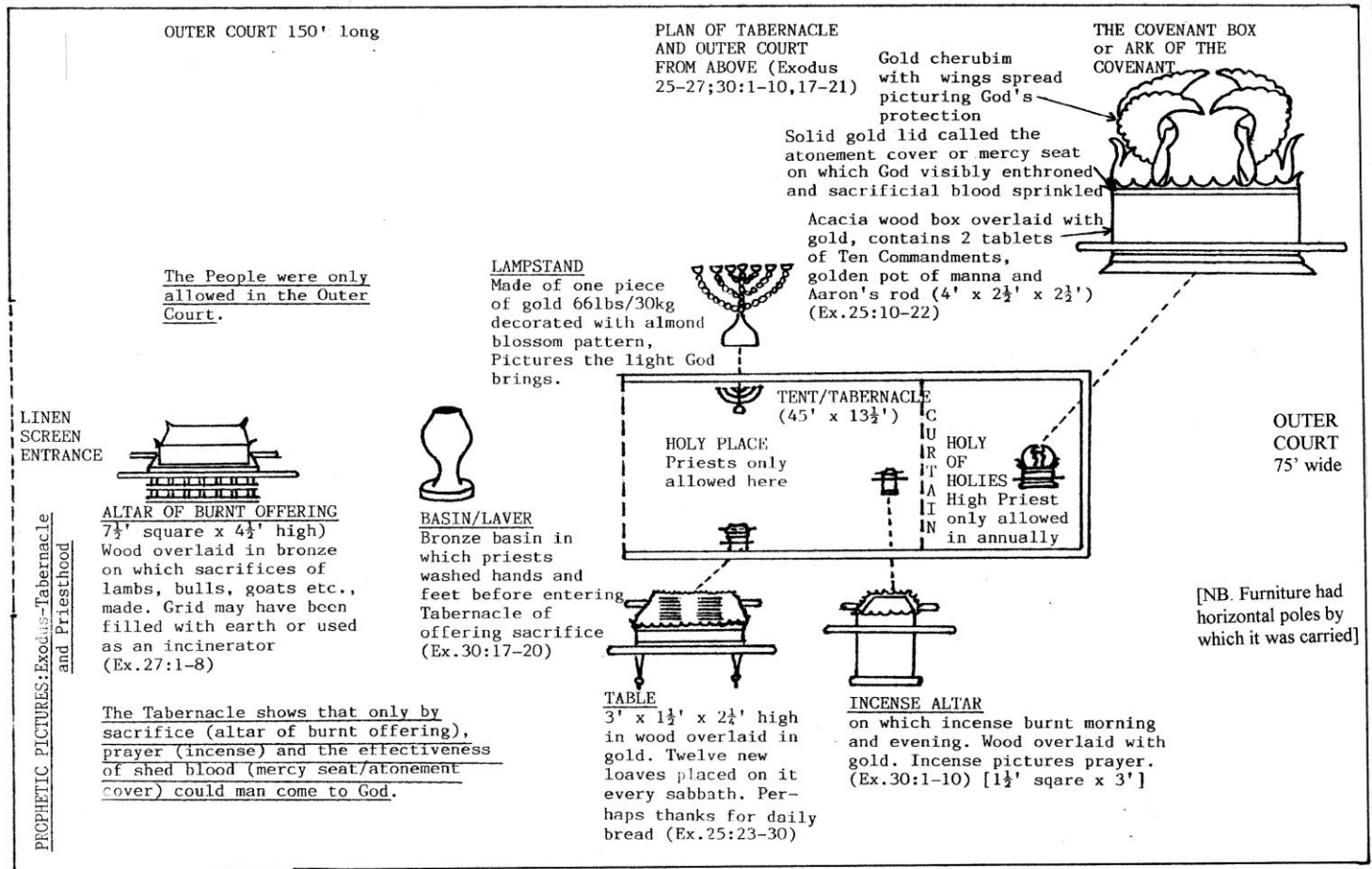
Moses was so long on the mountain receiving the Law from God that the people grew impatient (chap. 32). They urged Aaron to make idols who would be their gods. So Aaron made a golden calf out of the gold contributed by the people. Moses, warned by God of what was happening, returned and in his anger broke the tables on which the Law was written. He destroyed the calf and plague broke out among the people. Moses returned to spend time with God and receive new stone tablets. He had remarkable experiences of God (chap. 33). When he returned the people were afraid because of the radiance of his face and he had to wear a veil (chap. 34).

Exodus: The revealing of the law

The Ritual Law

This centred around the tabernacle (portable sanctuary containing the ark and other ritual objects)

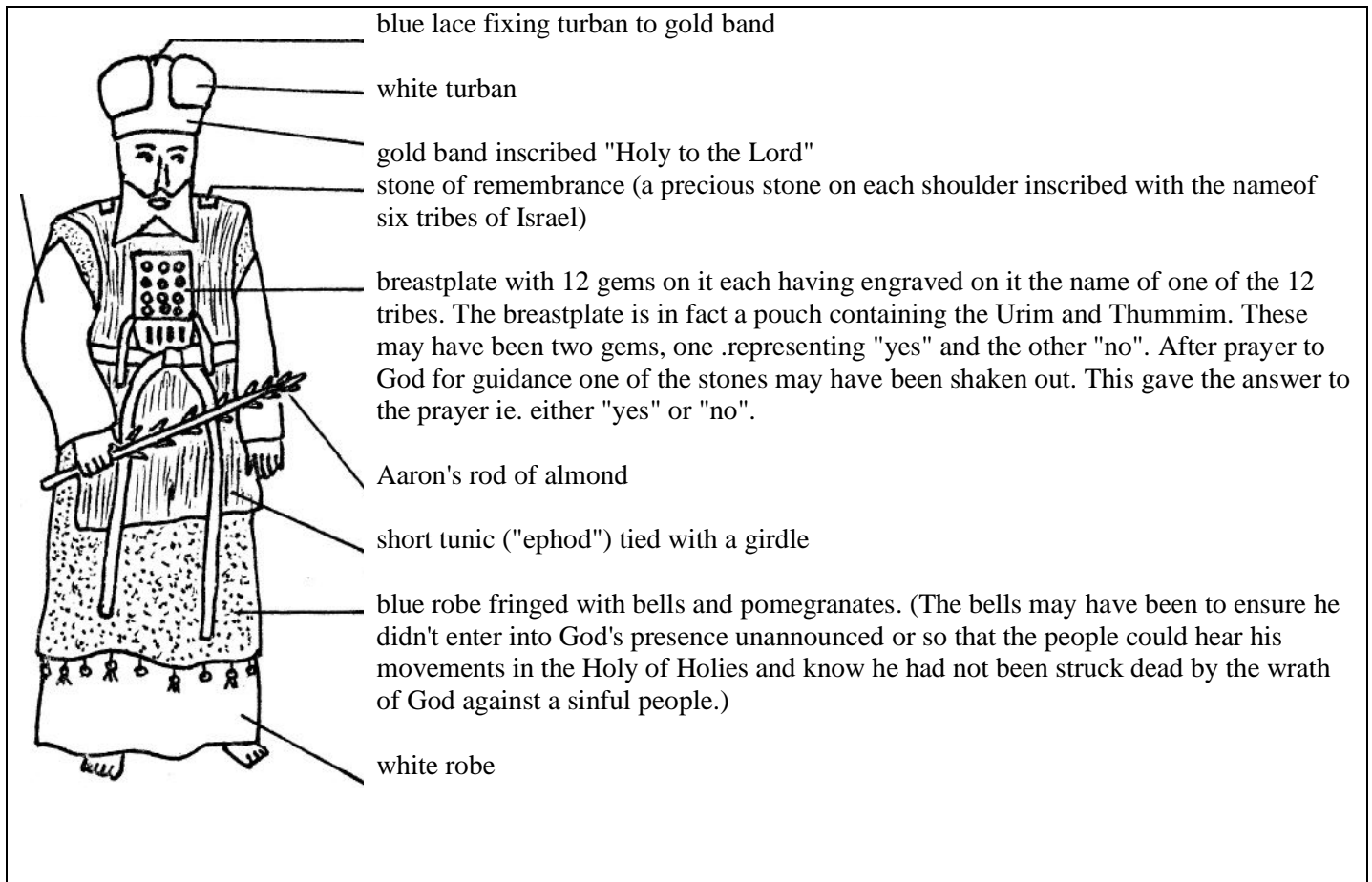
Sketch Plan of the Tabernacle



FURTHER NOTES ON THE TABERNACLE

The actual tent or tabernacle was covered first with linen curtains decorated with blue, purple and scarlet tapestry which showed on the inside of the Holy Place. Over these curtains were placed a second layer of goat's hair curtains. The third layer was of weatherproof ram's skin dyed red. The outer layer was a waterproof sealskin or porpoise skin curtain. The tabernacle had a flat roof 15' high. The entrance was on the east end nearest to the basin/laver.

THE HIGH PRIEST



The consecration ceremony of the high priest included the sacrifice of an animal as a burnt offering, then another as a sin offering. Some of the sacrificial blood was put on the right ear, right thumb and right big toe of the high priest. This symbolised cleansing, i.e. the high priest will hear and obey: hand and foot will work for the Lord.

The fulfilment of these visual aids in the New Testament

The ceremonial law of the Old Testament provides prophetic pictures of the work of Christ. Without the shedding blood there is no forgiveness of sin. A sacrifice must be offered in our place to redeem us from sin and its consequences.

Jesus, the perfect high priest enters, not annually, but once for all into heaven (The Holy of Holies where God dwells). He did not take animal blood to gain forgiveness for his people; he took his own blood, shed on the cross. The result is that we have free access to God through his blood. The curtain or veil of the tabernacle (and later the temple) is torn in two. This happened literally at Jesus' death, of course. So God is no longer hidden with only the high priest being allowed to enter his presence once a year. We can all enter his presence. There may be connections between the basin/laver and baptism; the lampstand and Jesus the light of the world; the showbread and Jesus, the bread of life.

Leviticus: More Prophetic Pictures: Sacrifices and Feast Days

Leviticus is a book of rules for the Levites (hence the name). They were the tribe of Levi from which Aaron and his sons became the priests for the people of Israel. The message of Leviticus, although apparently remote, is important for understanding the meaning of the cross.

THE SACRIFICES

1. The burnt offering (chap. 1; 6:8-13) (voluntary)

The worshipper took a perfect animal (either a bull, ram or male bird - only the best was good enough) and placed his hands on it to show it was a sacrifice for his own sins. The whole of the animal was burnt on the altar (except the skin was given to the priests) as a token of *dedication to God*. The blood was sprinkled on the altar. The fire on the altar of burnt offering was to be kept burning continually.

2. The cereal (meal or grain) offering (chap. 2; 6: 14-18) (voluntary)

Flour, grain, cakes or grain mixed with olive oil and frankincense formed a goodwill offering to God, *asking him to "remember" the worshipper for good*. Part - the "memorial portion" - was burnt on the altar and part given for the upkeep of the priests. These offerings often accompanied burnt and peace offerings. Again, the offering must be the best, any cakes must not contain leaven or honey (i.e. unadulterated) except when part of a fellowship* offering. But they should contain salt.

3. The peace (fellowship) offering (chap. 3; 7: 11-36) (voluntary)

The procedure was the same as for the burnt offering except that only the fat (considered the best portion) was burnt. The rest was shared by the worshipper and his family. Hence it was thought of as a fellowship meal - *re-establishing fellowship* between the worshipper and God, or it could be a thank offering*.

4. The sin offering (chap. 4: 1-5; 13; 6: 24-30) (mandatory)

This was to *gain forgiveness - for sins where restitution was impossible*. It may, therefore, have been generally speaking *for sins against God* (although all sins are ultimately against him). It was only for accidental or 'unwitting' sins. For deliberate sins sacrifice only expressed repentance. Part of the animal was burnt but the blood was used to cleanse the tabernacle etc. which was thought of as defiled by the sin. The procedure is the same as the burnt offering. The offering would be a young bull (for the high priest and people); a male goat (for a leader); a female goat or lamb (for ordinary people); a dove or pigeon (for the poor) or 2.2 litres of flour (for the very poor).

5. The guilt (trespass) offering (chap. 5: 14 - 6: 7; 7: 1-10) (mandatory)

This was to *gain forgiveness - for sins where restitution was possible*. It may, therefore, have been generally speaking *for sins against other people*. The procedure is the same as for the sin offering. The blood was sprinkled to show that the defilement was removed through the death of the animal. The priest ate some of the offering. When the worshipper saw no harm came to the priest, he knew he was forgiven. Restitution would involve restoring what was stolen etc. plus a 20% fine. The sacrificial animal was a ram or lamb.

These sacrifices were the way appointed by God for Israel to receive forgiveness. Animal sacrifice couldn't really take away sin: but these sacrifices pointed forward to the cross (which fulfilled all of them) and it is because the cross would take place that they were forgiven. N.B. Unlike surrounding nations, the ritual law was linked with moral law, so there was none of the extreme immorality and occult activity which accompanied pagan sacrifices. Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu "offered unholy fire" (incense) and they were struck dead. (chap. 10). It is possible they were drunk (chap. 10:9).

LAWS FOR DAILY LIFE

1. Food laws (chap. 11)

These contain sensible health regulations, which still have relevance. Animals banned as food include carnivorous animals, pigs, vermin, predatory birds and shellfish - all of which easily transmit disease, especially in a warm climate.

2. Laws of strict cleanliness in sexual matters (chap. 12, 15)

3. Laws of quarantine and preventative medicine concerning skin diseases (chap. 13-14)

THE FESTIVALS OF ISRAEL

Jan	10 Tebat	Spring Growth	
Feb	11 Shebat		
Mar	12 Adar	Pulling	PURIM
Apr	1 Nisan	Flax Barley Harvest	13 th /14 th PESACH (Passover) 14 th 1 st Fruits 21 st
May	2 Iyar	General Harvest	
Jun	3 Siven	Vine Tending	SHAVUOT (Weeks) (Pentecost/Harvest)
Jul	4 Tammuz		
Aug	5 Ab	Summer Fruit	
Sep	6 Elul	Olive Harvest	ROSH HASHANAH (New Year/Trumpets) 1 st YOM KIPPUR (Day of Atonement) 10 th SUKKOT (Tabernacles/(Booths/Shelters/Ingatherings) 15 th -21 st
Oct	7 Tishri	Ploughing	
Nov	8 Marchesvan	Grain Planting	
Dec	9 Kislev		CHANNUKAH (Dedication/Lights)

PURIM is a feast begun almost a thousand years after Leviticus was written. Purim means ‘lots’ and refers to the lots cast by Haman, prime minister of Persian king Xerxes (Ahasuerus), to decide on which day he should massacre the Jews. Esther and Mordecai save them. See Esther 9: 18-32

PESACH (Passover) (See "Exodus - History for details). At first this was a home feast, but later became the main pilgrim festival at Jerusalem.

FEAST OF UNLEAVENED BREAD. On last day the first sheaf of barley harvest was presented to God.

SHAVUOT (Weeks/Pentecost/Harvest). 50 days after Passover, at end of grain harvest, the priest offered two

loaves made from new flour together with animal sacrifices. Later it was called Pentecost from Greek word for '50th' A great harvest thanksgiving.

ROSH HASHANAH (New Year/Trumpets). Every month (new moon) was heralded by a blast on the ram's horn trumpet (shofar) but the 1st day of 7th month was a special day of worship and rest i.e. the most solemn month. After the exile it was treated as new year festival (Rosh Hashanah) but months are still counted from Nisan.

YOM KIPPUR (Day of atonement). All the people confessed their sins. The high priest, in white linen, offered an animal sacrifice first for his and the priests' sins then for people's. It was the only day of the year when he was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies to sprinkle blood from the sacrifice on the mercy seat. Then he took a goat, laid hands on it confessing the people's sins over it and sent it off to the desert to show the sins had been taken away. (Leviticus 16)

SUKKOT (Tabernacles/Booths/Shelters/Ingathering). This was a most popular festival after fruit harvest. The people camped in gardens or on the roof in tents (tabernacles) or huts made from tree branches (reminding them of the tents in desert). At one point water was poured on ground with prayers for rain in the coming season. (John 7)

CHANNUKAH (Dedication/Lights). A feast begun much later by Judas Maccabaeus in 165BC to mark the rededication of the second temple after the Syrian king Antiochus IV Epiphanes had defiled it. Lamps were lit in the homes and synagogues. The feast is mentioned in John 10:22.

THE MORAL LAW (Exodus - Deuteronomy)

There are three aspects to the Law in the Old Testament:

The Ritual or Ceremonial Law, which we have looked at briefly and which was fulfilled in Christ.

The Moral Law. The moral law is still binding on us, unless it has been specifically changed by New Testament teaching. We are not accepted by God through keeping the law, but through faith in Christ. However, faith in Christ means the Holy Spirit dwells within us to enable us to keep God's law out of gratitude for our salvation.

The Civil Law: the historical law strictly related to the structure and national life of ancient Israel, including the system of punishment etc., which is not binding upon us. It was related specifically to God's chosen people in ancient Israel. However, we can learn from it.

PUNISHMENTS: It may seem that some of the punishments are extreme. We need to remember that Israel was part of Ancient Near Eastern culture. However some of the Old Testament punishments were less than those of other ancient Near Eastern cultures. In other nations for certain crimes a person's tongue, breast, hand or ear would be cut off. Egyptian law permitted between one hundred and two hundred lashes to be given to a criminal. We should also note that Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 suffered the death penalty at the hand of God for being dishonest about their giving. In addition, it should be remembered that in England the death penalty was applied to 160 crimes in the mid-18th century, not just murder. In the mid 19th century this was reduced to five crimes.

The Moral Law is based on the 10 Commandments and in this section some of the wider teaching on the principle enshrined in a commandment is added to the explicit meaning. In so doing the teaching of Exodus to Deuteronomy is briefly outlined:

1. You shall have no other gods before me

Deut. 6: 4-5 "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

2. You shall not make for yourself an idol

This would include not only explicit idol-worship but also dabbling with the occult, which is related to the demonic world. Some idols were seen as demons. "Do not practise divination or sorcery." (Lev. 19: 26) "Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them." (19: 31) "A man or a woman who is a medium or spiritist among you must be put to death." (20: 27, so Exodus 22: 18). "Let no-one be found among you who ... practises divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord." (Deut.18:10-12).

3. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God

Ex. 22:28 Do not blaspheme God." Lev. 24:15-16 "If anyone curses God, he will be held responsible; anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord must be put to death."

4. Remember the sabbath day by keeping it holy

This is the principle of having a weekly day of rest from work which provides an opportunity to worship God with the believing community. It also was a provision for the welfare of slaves and animals: "... on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox may rest and the slave born in your household, and the alien as well, may be refreshed." (Ex. 23:12).

However the Old Testament also taught that every seventh year is a *sabbatical year*. In it:

- The land is left fallow - unploughed, unused, unsown, unreaped - but the owner and the *poor and alien may take food* directly from what grows by itself. (Ex. 23:10-11; Lev. 25:1-7).
- Slaves were to set free.

SLAVERY: Slavery in ancient Israel was very different from the sort of slavery seen, for example, in the United States. Being a slave (or servant) wasn't much different from being a paid employee. When a slave was sold it should be seen as similar to a football player being sold by one club to another. A slave could go free when he had paid his debt or was released under the law in the 7th or jubilee year unless he decided to stay with his master, in which case his ear was pierced and he stays for life.. It was forbidden to kidnap a person into slavery. No physical abuse of slaves was allowed (Exodus 21:26-27). If a slave married and was released he could either work elsewhere whilst he waited for the family to complete their term or he could commit himself to work for his employer for life (Exodus 21:2-6).

5. Honour your father and your mother

It follows that “Anyone who attacks his father or his mother must be put to death.” (Ex. 21:15). “Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death” (21:17, so Lev. 20:9).

“If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him ... (he is a profligate and a drunkard) then all the men of his town shall stone him to death.” (Deut.21:18-21).

“Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly.” (Lev. 19:32). “Cursed is the man who dishonours his father or his mother.” (27:16).

6. You shall not murder

The basic positive principle behind this commandment is found in Lev. 19:18 “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but *love your neighbour as yourself*. I am the Lord.” It includes not only murder but resentment and violence towards, or maltreatment of, another person. We briefly look at all these aspects in this section. The commandment applies to the alien v.34 “The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native born. *Love him as yourself*, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.” The truth is that God “defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing.” (Deut. 10:18)

So the law states “Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbour frankly so that you will not share in his guilt” (Lev.19: 17). Also the alien, widow and orphan must not be ill treated (Ex. 22: 22-24). The deaf must not be cursed, nor the blind caused to stumble (Lev. 19:14) or led astray (Deut. 27:18).

At the other end of the scale a murderer is under a curse (Deut.27:24 as is a hired killer Deut. 27:25) and is to be executed (Ex. 21:12, 14; Lev.24:17; Num.35:16-21). However, someone guilty of manslaughter may flee to a ‘city of refuge’ and stay there until the death of the high priest (Ex.21:13; Num.35:22-28). A kidnapper must also be executed (Ex.21:16). If a man beats a slave to death he must be punished (Ex.21:20-21). If he blinds a slave or knocks out his tooth, the slave must be freed. (Ex.21:26-27). A Hebrew ‘slave’ must be treated as a hired worker and released in the year of Jubilee (Lev.25:39-43). A slave who takes refuge with someone must be allowed to stay (Deut.23:15).

Any injury in a fight which requires confinement to bed must be compensated for loss of earnings (Ex.21:18-19). If two men fighting injure a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely, the man responsible must be fined. Any serious injury must be compensated - life for life, eye for eye etc. (Ex.21:22-25 – Lex Talionis). Any injury of a neighbour must be similarly punished (Lev.24:19-20).

If a man's bull kills someone, including a slave, it must be killed. If the animal is in the habit of goring and the owner has not taken proper precautions, he must be executed unless payment is demanded of him instead.

(Ex.21:28-32)

“Do not do anything that endangers your neighbour’s life. I am the Lord” (Lev.19:16). So, for example, a house must have a parapet around its roof as a safety measure. (Deut.22:8)

Finally, the dignity of man is such that an offender must not be given more than forty lashes “If he is flogged more than that, your brother will be degraded in your eyes” (Deut.25:3). If a thief is killed by the householder in the dark, the householder is innocent, after sunrise, however, he is guilty (Ex.22:2). A kidnapper is to be executed. (Deut.24:7)

7. You shall not commit adultery

Here we include other aspects of sexual immorality as well as literal adultery. Adultery is punished by death (Lev.20:10; Deut.22:22) as is homosexual practice (Lev.18:22, 20:13) and bestiality (Lev.18:23, 20:15; Deut.27:21). If a man has sexual intercourse with a virgin who is betrothed to another man (and, therefore, regarded as his wife) he is to be executed. If the woman was ‘raped’ in the town and didn’t scream for help, she too must be executed (Deut.22:23-27)

The law forbids a man to have sexual intercourse with his (step) mother, mother-in-law, (step) sister, sister-in-law, grandchildren, daughter-in-law, aunt. (Lev.18:1-18; Deut.27:20, 22-23). A man who sleeps with his (step) mother, daughter-in-law or with a woman and her mother must be executed. There are lesser penalties in other cases (Lev.20:11-14,17-21).

If a man wrongly accuses his new wife of immorality he must be fined. If the accusation is true, she must be executed (Deut.22:13-21) . If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed, he must pay the bride price, marry her and never divorce her (Deut. 22:28-29). If her father forbids the marriage, the man must still pay the bride price (Ex.22:16-17). If a man has sexual relations with a slave girl promised to another man, they are to be punished but not executed (Lev.19:20-22).

Finally, there must be no prostitution (Lev.19:29) or temple prostitution (Deut. 23:17-18); people must not wear the clothing of the opposite sex (Deut. 22:5) and a man may not remarry the wife he divorced, who has since been remarried. (Deut.24:1-4)

8. You shall not steal

The law not only condemns stealing, fraud and other forms of dishonesty but also encourages the opposite – generosity.

A thief must pay restitution e.g. five cattle for every ox, four sheep for every sheep (Ex.22:1) (or plus one fifth Num.5:5-6). If the thief cannot make restitution, he must be sold (Ex.22:3). If a stolen animal is found alive in his possession he must pay back double (Ex.22:4).

If goods are entrusted to a neighbour then stolen, the thief, if caught, must repay double. But if the thief is not found the neighbour must be examined by the judges to see if he stole it. If an animal is injured or dies or is taken away in the neighbour’s absence and he swears that is true before the Lord, then no restitution required. However, if the animal was stolen from the neighbour he must pay restitution. If a man borrows an animal which is injured or died when the owner is absent, he must pay restitution. (Ex.22:7-15)

“Do not defraud your neighbour or rob him ... Do not use dishonest standards when measuring length, weight or quantity. Use honest scales and honest weights ...” (Lev.19:13, 35-36) (cf Deut.25:13-16). Withholding wages is seen as stealing. “Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight” (Lev. 19:13, cf. Deut. 24:1).

Restitution must be made for damage caused by stray animals (Ex.22:5) or fire (Ex.22:6). If a bull injures another man’s bull and it dies, they must sell the live animal and divide the proceeds and the dead animal equally (Ex.21:35) But if the bull had been in the habit of goring, but was not penned up, the owner must pay and the dead animal will be his (Ex.21:36). If a man kills another man’s animal, he must pay restitution

(Lev.24:17-18). If a man has an uncovered pit and an animal falls into it, he must pay restitution (Ex.21:33-34). In fact, men are required to look after and, where possible, return stray animals or animals in trouble (Ex.23:4-5; Dt.22:1-4). (Also, incidentally, a mother bird must not be taken along with her babies Deut.22:6-7).

However, the law encourages people to be generous. “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and alien.” (Lev.19:9-10). “When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow.” (Deut.24:19-21).

Similarly, a man may eat all the grapes he wants from his neighbour’s vineyard, but not put any into a basket, and may pick ears of corn by hand, but not using a sickle (Deut.23:24-25).

It is not permitted to charge interest of a fellow Israelite (Deut.23:19-20, 25:35-38). But, in making a loan, a pledge must not be in the form of something essential to the borrower's livelihood e.g. a millstone (Deut.24:6) or widow's cloak (Deut.24:17). It is not permitted to enter the borrower’s home to take a pledge. A pledged cloak must be returned by sunset (Deut.24:10-13).

As we have seen, every seventh year is a sabbatical year when debts are cancelled for fellow Israelites (Deut.15:3). “However, there should be no poor among you ... do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your poor brother. Rather be open-handed and freely lend him whatever he needs” (Deut.15:4,7,8). When a Hebrew slave is freed in the sabbatical year he must be supplied liberally with food etc., (Deut.15:12-14). Every 50th year is the Year of Jubilee when land and property sold to Israelites reverts to its original owner. No land is sold permanently: it belongs to the Lord (Lev. 25:23-28). However houses in *walled* towns, if sold, may be redeemed within one year. After that they belong permanently to the buyer and are not returned in the year of Jubilee. Other houses, considered to be in the country, are returned (Lev. 25:29-31)

Land is therefore to be bought at a price relative to the proximity of the jubilee year. No advantages are to be taken in this (Lev.14-17).

9. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour

“Do not lie. Do not deceive one another. Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God ... Do not go about spreading slander among your people” (Lev.19:11, 12, 16). “Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness. Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd and do not show favouritism to a poor man in his lawsuit, Ex.23:1 & 2, cf “Do not pervert justice; do not shown partiality to the poor or favouritism to the great, but judge your neighbour fairly” (Lev.19:15).

“Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits” (Ex.23:6). “Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice” (Deut.24:17). “Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow” (Deut 27:19 cf 16:18; Ex 23:9).

“Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds those who see and twists the words of the righteous.” (Ex.23:7-8). There must be two or three witnesses of a crime and a perjurer must be punished by being made to suffer the evil he intended to do through his perjury (Deut.19:15-20).

10. You shall not covet

The law of tithing plus offerings (see <http://www.christianteaching.org.uk/tithing.html>). As we have seen, no interest was to be charged of a Hebrew borrower (Ex.22:25; Deut.23:15). Anyone who removed his neighbour's boundary stone was under a curse (Dt.27:17 cf 19:14).

MISCELLANEOUS LAWS

Do not eat carrion: "You are to be my holy people. So do not eat the meat of an animal torn by wild beasts: throw it to the dogs." It was unthinkable for the holy people to eat carrion, meat which had not been ritually slaughtered. (Ex.22:31, so Deut.14:21).

Avoid magic: "Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk" (Ex.23:19). Canaanite texts show that this practice was a magic spell. Maimonides, a medieval Jewish scholar warned that it was fertility magic. "The ban on the pig was probably ritual because of its use outside Israel in sacrifice: the ban on the donkey almost certainly so because of its place in Amorite religion (e.g. in covenant sacrifice)." (Alan Cole, Tyndale OT Commentary on Exodus).

"Do not mate different kinds of animals. Do not plant your fields with two kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of materials" (Lev.19:19).

Selective mating was practised (Gen.30:37-40) but enriching the blood line and producing hybrid species was forbidden, perhaps because the Israelites might imitate such abnormal sexual unions and ultimately indulge in orgies like the Canaanites.

Not planting two different seeds is perhaps because adopting that method as opposed to rotating crops would impoverish the land more quickly.

Garments made of two different materials create static electricity in tropical climates and are uncomfortable. Some modern combinations of wool/cotton and synthetic fibres produce an allergic reaction.

In all these things, though, the fundamental reason may have been religious. It may have been to ban unnatural combinations which would violate the purity of the species.

Lev.19:27-28 bans trimming hair at the side of the head, the edges of the beard, cutting the body for the dead or tattoos. These were all pagan mourning practices. Tattoos, which probably included emblems of pagan deities, dishonoured the divine image in man.

Deut.22:5 is a ban on wearing clothes of the opposite sex. Lucian of Somosata and Eusebius speak of this practice in the worship of Astarte. Some think it may be a magical cure of infertility.

Numbers

This book covers the 38 years in which Israel wandered in the Sinai peninsula.

1. Israel in the wilderness of Sinai (chap. 1-10)

A general census was taken of those eligible for military service (chap. 1-2). The numbers quoted are thought by scholars to be too high i.e. 600,000 fighting men suggests a total population of 2-3 million. The word translated “thousands” may mean “captains” or “families.” Or possibly the numbers were used as symbols of power and importance. But none of these explanations is completely satisfactory. It is clear in any case that God blessed Israel with remarkable increase of numbers during their time in Egypt. The Levites were exempt from military service, allowed to camp around the tabernacle (the portable sanctuary) and were given various jobs transporting it (chap. 3-4). Now God accepts the Levites as holy to himself in place of the first-born sons of Israel.

God guided the people clearly. A cloud appeared over the tabernacle by day and a fire by night. When the cloud moved on they followed. When it stopped, they stopped (chap. 9-10).

2. Sinai to Kadesh (chap. 10:11-12:16)

At Taberah the people moaned about their hardships and the outskirts of the camp was burned by “fire from the Lord” (lightning?). Then they complained about the monotonous diet of manna and wished they still had the food they’d enjoyed in Egypt. Moses found the burden of leadership in these circumstances so great that God told him to appoint 70 elders to help lead the people. Then God provided meat, in that quails migrated through the area again. However, the people ate so many that they became sick of them and there followed a plague which was judgment for their moaning (chap. 11).

Israel travelled to Hazeroth and here Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses for marrying an Ethiopian woman (chap. 12). The real issue was rebellion against his leadership. Miriam, the instigator, contracted a skin disease which lasted a week and was a punishment for rebellion against God’s appointed leader.

3. Near Kadesh (chap. 13-20:21, cf Deut. 1-2)

On they travelled to the Wilderness of Paran and the area of Kadesh Barnea. Twelve men were sent to spy out the promised land of Canaan. Ten of them returned with horror stories about races of giants and fortified cities. The other two, Caleb and Joshua, said Israel could easily conquer the land. The people believed the bad reports and wanted to return to Egypt (chap. 14). They were ready to stone Joshua, Caleb, Moses and Aaron to death. Still, however, Moses pleaded for God to have mercy on Israel. The Lord did forgive but said that none of the present generation of adults (except Caleb and Joshua) would reach the promised land. The ten spies died of plague. When some Israelites decided to ignore what God had said and went off to fight the Amalekites, they were defeated at Hormah because the Lord was not with them. Thus began a period of 38 years wandering in the desert.

Korah, Dathan and Abiram led a revolt against Moses’ leadership and Aaron’s control of the priesthood (chap. 16). This rebellion was ended by a natural disaster - the ground “split apart” and the rebels perished. This may have been the breaking up (perhaps by a storm) of the hard crusty surface which forms over deep lakes of liquid mud in the Arabah rift valley, where the event occurred. The men who were seeking to usurp the priests’ position were also struck dead. The people blamed Moses for all these deaths and a plague broke out which was only stopped by Aaron standing amongst the people and offering incense to God.

Soon after Miriam’s death, the people grumbled at the lack of water (chap. 20). God told Moses to command a rock to bring forth water (Sinai limestone is known to retain water as we have already noted). But Moses was irritated and struck the rock and caused the people to give him the credit. God, therefore, told Moses he would not be allowed to lead Israel into the promised land.

4. Detour around Edom (chap. 20:92-21:35 cf Deut. 2-3)

The King of Edom refused to allow Israel to cross his territory and so they travelled south from Kadesh. At Mount Hor Aaron died. On they went to Ezion-geber and Elath on the Gulf of Aqaba. Again the people grumbled about the food and were bitten by snakes. God told Moses to erect a brass snake on a pole. Those who obeyed God and looked at the brass snake in faith would live. (Jesus likened this to the cross in John 3:14). Then they travelled north passing to the east of the Dead Sea, defeating King Sihon at Heshbon, and Og King of Bashan, at Edrei (to the east of the Sea of Galilee).

5. Israel in plains of Moab (chap. 22-36)

Balak, king of Moab, sent for the diviner Balaam, asking him to come and curse Israel. (The power of a curse was readily accepted in those days). The Lord who was guiding Balaam told him not to curse Israel. However, Balak sent other messengers and God allowed Balaam to go to Balak. An angel appeared on the way and sought to ensure he would obey the Lord. Four times in Balak's presence Balaam blessed Israel and foretold their victory (chap. 23-24). Balak was infuriated.

But Israel committed idolatry - worshipping the local god - Baal of Peor (chap. 25). This involved idolatrous and sexual practices and led to plague breaking out. The Midianites (also known as Moabites and Ishmaelites) who encouraged this idolatry were severely defeated by Israel (chap. 31). Sadly, Balaam had helped cause the idolatry and was killed in the battle.

Moses ascended Mount Nebo in the mountains of Abarim overlooking Jericho and viewed the promised land (see Deut. 32). God told him to appoint Joshua as his successor (see Deut. 31). The tribes of Reuben, Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh were allowed to settle in Gilead (to the south east of the Sea of Galilee) on condition that they first helped with the conquest of Canaan.

DEUTERONOMY

This book contains the final addresses by Moses to Israel on the plains of Moab. It includes a restatement of the law and the Sinai covenant. This was important as the people were about to enter the promised land.

History re-told (chap. 1 - 4)

The history recorded in Numbers is briefly retold. They are warned neither to add to nor subtract from the law of God, as he is the God who brought them from Egypt and defeated their enemies (including those more powerful than Israel).

Basic laws (chap. 5 - 11)

The 10 Commandments are repeated (chap.5). The greatest commandment is “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (chap. 6). The law must be taught diligently to children. It is to be bound to one’s hand, to be a frontlet between the eyes and to be written on the doorposts. This poetic command is taken literally by some Jews. They wear a phylactery - passages from the law in a small box - bound to the forehead, and a similar box - a mezuzah - on the door-post.

Israel was called to be a holy nation from which the messiah would come and mankind could be saved from eternal destruction. It was vital therefore, that Israel did not compromise with the pagan Canaanite nations.

Canaanite religion was very evil. Baal ("Lord") is the name for Hadad the weather god, his wife was Astarte (also known as Anat, goddess of love and war); his father was El, and his mother Asherah, goddess of the sea. Both Asherah and Astarte are often called ‘Mistress’ (Baalat). There were also Shamash - sun god, Reshef - lord of war and the underworld; Dagon – the corn god, and many lesser gods. Each town had its own patron god. These gods were brutal and bloodthirsty, delighting in fighting each other and enjoying uncontrolled sexual relationships. So religious activities were very depraved, including male and female prostitution. Even Greek and Roman writers were shocked by what the Canaanites did in their religion. Occult practices and even human sacrifice were involved. Live infants were sometimes placed in the arms of an idol and died in the flames burning inside it. God used Israel to bring punishment on these evils.

For comments on the moral issue raised by the destruction of the Canaanites, see the introduction to the Book of Joshua.

Israel is told to remember the exodus, the wilderness and their sinfulness so they would not take the credit for their victories but to be humble, faithful and obedient.

Detailed laws (chap. 12 - 26)

(Here are some not already written about above).

- a. Canaanite religion is to be wiped out and God will appoint a special place for sacrifices (chap.12).
- b. Israel could have a king but he should not build up a great army or have many wives (chap.17). (300 years later King Solomon disobeyed this command and disaster followed).
- c. If prophets advise worshipping other gods or foretell events which do not happen, they are to be executed. (chap. 13, 18).
- d. Those who have built a new house, planted a new vineyard or are newly married are exempt from military service as are the fainthearted.
- e. Corporal punishment was not to extract confession or to remove human dignity and self respect (chap.25).

- f. The levirate ('husband's brother') law: If a married man died leaving no sons, his brother was to make the widow his wife so that she may have a son and preserve the family name. If he refused, she was entitled before the elders to pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face.
- g. The people are to give generously and ungrudgingly to the poor. Slaves are to be released after 7 years and given gifts of food and drink. (chap.15).
- h. A person may only be executed on the evidence of two or three witnesses (chap. 17, 19).

Curses and Blessings (chap. 27 -31)

The people are told to go to Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal (near Shechem). The law is to be engraved on stones. Six tribes go to one mountain and six to the other. The Levites then pronounced a curse on twelve infringements of the law – idolatry, dishonouring parents, stealing land, misleading the blind, oppressing the immigrant and needy, incest, bestiality, murder, etc. The people shouted 'amen' to each one. Obedience means victory, peace, fruitfulness and prosperity. Disobedience meant disease, famine, defeat, slavery, even siege and exile.

Moses' song, blessing and death (chap. 32)

Moses blesses the tribes - Simeon is omitted, being later absorbed by Judah. Then he ascends Mount Nebo (see map above in the section *Exodus and Numbers: history Egypt to Canaan*) to overlook the promised land and died. Joshua, the son of Nun, who with Caleb had been a faithful spy in the wilderness became Moses' successor. But until Elijah there was no greater prophet than Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. No-one had done greater miracles.

(Deuteronomy is full of encouragement and comfort. Christians are meant to 'go in and possess' the promised land, i.e., all the spiritual, emotional, social and physical benefits God has made available in Christ. Often we hesitate to do so through fear and lack of faith. Read through passages like Deuteronomy 1:30-31; 4:9, 29-31; 5:29; 7: 7-8(a), 9; 10:12-15,17; 14:2; 29:19; 31:6; 33: 26-27(a) ('Jeshurun' = Israel).)

JOSHUA - The Conquest of Canaan.

Joshua to Kings are sometimes known as the 'Former Prophets' i.e. they are prophetic history showing God's covenant ways with Israel.

'GENOCIDE' OF THE CANAANITES: This, of course, raises an important moral issue. For a detailed response please see "*The Nature of God in the Old Testament.*" It seems clear that the Old Testament uses "Ancient Near Eastern Exaggeration Rhetoric" and makes exaggerated claims about the destruction of enemies, which was not seen as lying but as an accepted convention. There is substantial biblical and archaeological evidence that many Canaanites were not exterminated. Also archaeology indicates that places like Jericho were not civilian settlements but military bases, so people killed there would be soldiers, not innocent civilians. It also seems clear that, on the principle of the incarnation (God becoming one of us and communicating on our level), God communicated with the Israelites as Ancient Near Eastern people using the concepts and terminology of their culture. This was part of "Progressive Revelation" the gradual revealing of more and more of God's truth and standards at a pace which the ancient Israelites could cope with.

(a) The conquest of Canaan (chap. 1-2)

The conquest of Canaan may well have happened at the traditional date of 1406BC but there is evidence to support the date 1250BC which some scholars hold. The Hittites, Babylonians, Egyptians and Assyrians were not very dominant at this time. Joshua took on Moses' responsibility, and in chap. 1 was encouraged by God in one of the greatest passages in the Bible. The Lord promised success as Joshua obeyed. Joshua commanded the people to be ready to cross over the Jordan and sent out spies to Jericho. They contacted Rahab - a prostitute. No-one would think anything of men being in her house and she probably could give them a great deal of information about the city. Her home was built into the city wall and had a flat roof on which she could dry flax to be used to spin linen thread. The king of Jericho heard of the spies but Rahab hid them under the flax. She did this because she believed the Lord was the true God. She then let the spies down by rope to escape to the hills. They told her to gather her family in the house and put a scarlet cord in the window so her life would be protected when Israel attacked.

(b) The crossing of Jordan (chap. 3-5)

Israel moved forward. When the priests carrying the ark entered the waters of the River Jordan (swollen at springtime by melted snows) the river stopped. A blockage at Adam (16 miles up river) dammed the flow. (In 1927 earth tremors caused a collapse of the high clay river banks at the same spot and the Jordan was dammed up for over 21 hours). So Israel crossed safely and the incident made them hold Joshua in awe. Two piles of 12 stones were erected - one where the priests bearing the ark had stood and one at Gilgal, their base camp on the west. These were memorials to the greatness of God. At Gilgal the males were circumcised. This rite had fallen into disuse in the wilderness because the covenant was suspended for those 40 years. The passover was celebrated and the manna ceased. An angel appeared to Joshua reassuring him of victory.

(c) The fall of Jericho (chap. 6)

Israel carried out a war of nerves against Jericho. On six days they marched around the city blowing trumpets. On the seventh day they did the same thing seven times and then shouted. The wall collapsed (some say through an earth tremor) and the city was taken. None of the contents were to be taken as personal spoil. What was not destroyed was to be given to the Lord's service. Joshua cursed the man who would rebuild Jericho. 400 years later Hiel rebuilt the city and suffered the curse (1 Kings 16: 34).

(d) The sin of Achan (chap. 7)

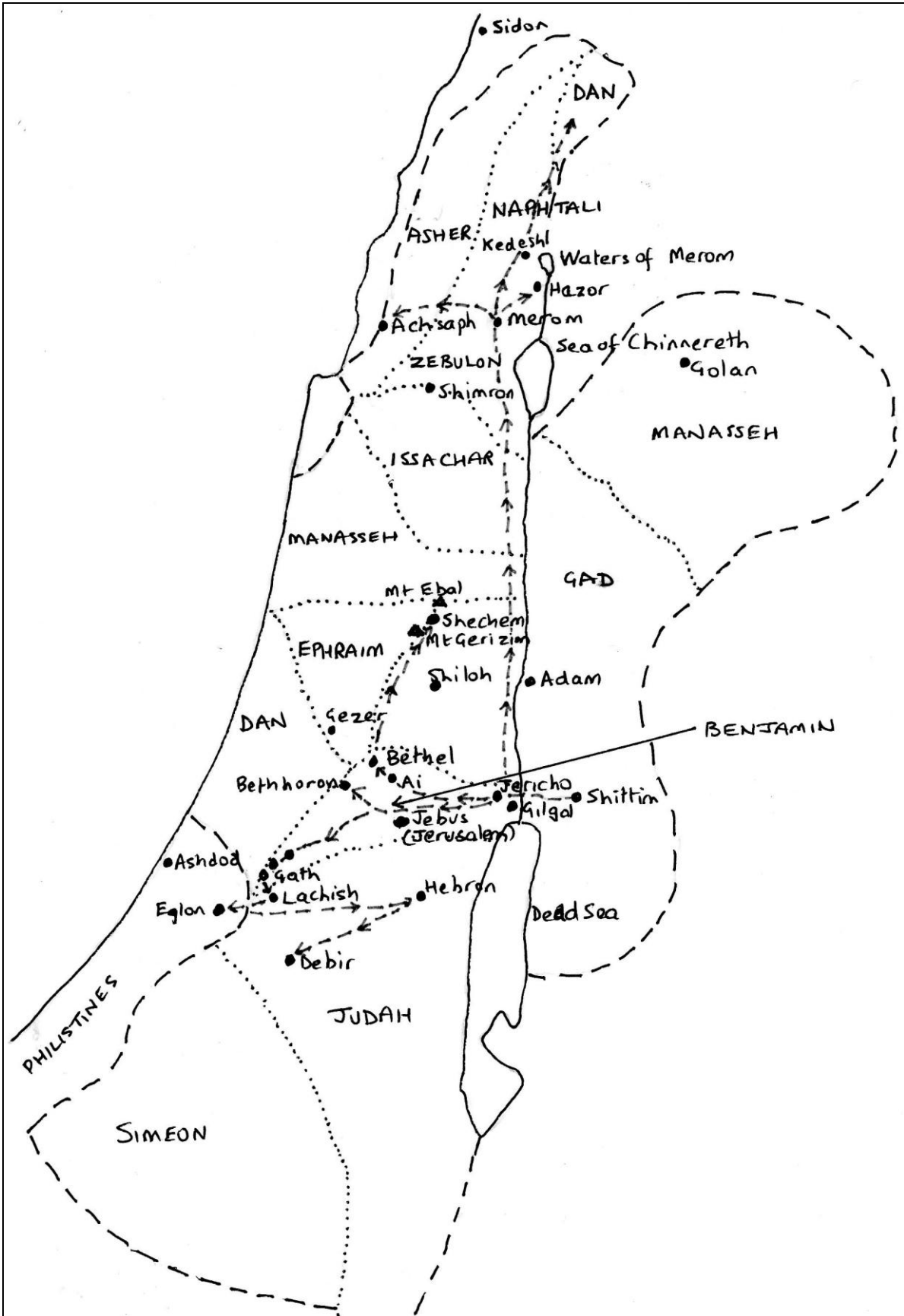
Achan disobeyed God by keeping some silver and gold as spoil. Consequently Israel were defeated by the people of Ai. The Urim and Thummim (see the sketch of the High Priest in the section on *Exodus: revealing of the Law* above) were used to discover Achan's sin and he was executed.

5. The conquest of Ai (chap. 8-9)

Joshua used a clever ambush. He sent men secretly to hide on the west of the city. Israel's main force advanced from the east and the men of Ai came out to fight leaving Ai empty. The main force of Israel retreated, drawing the enemy away from the city. At this point the men of Israel in ambush entered Ai and set fire to it. They proceeded to chase the men of Ai and the Israel main force turned to face them, so the men of Ai were caught between two forces of Israel and were defeated.

After this Joshua moved north to Shechem in the valley between Mt's. Ebal and Gerizim and obeyed the Lord's command through Moses to read the law and declare the consequences of obedience and disobedience. The men of Gibeon (near Jerusalem) tricked Israel into making a covenant of peace by pretending they came from a far country. Israel did not seek the Lord's guidance before agreeing to this. The covenant was binding so Israel made the Gibeonites slaves, instead of destroying them.

Sketch map of Joshua's campaigns and division of Canaan between the 12 tribes



6. The southern campaign (chap. 10: see map above)

Because of the treaty with Gibeon, the king of Jerusalem felt threatened and so invited four other Amorite kings to attack Gibeon. The Gibeonites appealed to Joshua who, after an all night march, defeated the Amorites and pursued them.

The 'long day' (Ch.10:12 -14) is usually taken as an extension of daylight, but it may have been a prolonged darkness ('go down' can simply mean 'come' or 'go'). It has recently been suggested that this was in fact an eclipse of the sun. The hailstorm then increased the darkness and confusion, aiding Israel's victory.

7. The northern campaign (chap. 11-12: see map)

8. The division of the land among the tribes (chap. 13-21: See map)

The land was divided up, each tribe being allotted a territory. Various cities of refuge (to which those guilty of manslaughter could flee for sanctuary) were designated. Also towns were allotted to the Levites who had no territory.

9. The altar of witness (chap. 22)

Joshua set up the Tabernacle at Shiloh. The Reubenites, Gadites and the half tribe of Manasseh went to their homelands across the Jordan. They set up an altar to show they belonged to Israel. The rest of the tribes mistook this for a rival sanctuary and possibly idolatry. It was explained, however, as a symbol of solidarity. Joshua challenged the people to uncompromising obedience to the Lord and renewed the covenant at Shechem. Joshua died and Joseph's bones, carried from Egypt) were buried at Shechem.

(Note on Archaeology: Many towns were simply taken over, not destroyed so little evidence of the change would be left. Excavations at Bethel, Beth Shemesh, Debir, Razor and Lachish reveal signs of violent destruction in the late 13th century BC. At Jericho there is no evidence at present of its fall at this period. Severe erosion of the mud-brick ruins is the reason for this. It seems there was no city at Ai at this time. But there is no reason to doubt that the Canaanites may have used the ruins of an earlier city there as a strategic fort).

JUDGES

This book covers the history of Israel between Joshua's death and the arrival of Samuel (approx. 1375-1050 BC). The Judges weren't simply legal officers, they were leaders who delivered the people from oppression by surrounding nations and so became rulers. The pattern is always the same. Israel commits idolatry so God allows them to be oppressed by the Canaanites. Israel cries for help and a 'judge' is raised up. All is well until the judge's death, when Israel again commits idolatry and the cycle is repeated. (See chap.2:11-23).

The judges sometimes used wrong means to achieve their ends (Ehud uses assassination, Jael breaks the sacred laws of hospitality, Jephthah was into human sacrifice, Samson lives an immoral life, Israel gloats over cruel revenge on their enemies). The Bible does not justify these actions. But because of the faith of the judges God could nevertheless use them.

The first chapter details further conquest of the land and points out the various cities were not conquered because of the disobedience of Israel. Hence some Canaanites remained among Israel to provide temptation and trouble. (See also chap. 3: 1-6).

THE TWELVE JUDGES.

(Dates approximate - we do not know the 'overlap' between the judges).

1. Othniel (chap. 3:9)

Othniel (1367-1327 BC) from Judah defeated Cushan-Rishathaim King of Mesopotamia (E.Syria and N.Iraq).

2. Ehud (chap. 3:15)

Ehud (1309-1229 BC) from Benjamin assassinated King Eglon of Moab, who had taken the City of Palms (Jericho) and subjugated Israel for 18 years. Ehud was left-handed and concealed a sword under his clothes on his right thigh, stabbing the unsuspecting Eglon. Israel subdued the Moabites.

3. Shamgar (chap. 3.31)

Shamgar achieved a temporary victory over the Philistines. At this time the Iron Age was beginning and the Philistines had iron chariots. Shamgar is reputed to have killed 600 men with an ox goad (a long wooden stick with a metal point).

4. Deborah (chap. 4 - 5)

Deborah (1209-1169) was from Ephraim and Barak from Naphtali (4:4-6). Deborah, the prophetess, summoned Barak and he led an Israelite army against King Jabin's general - Sisera. Israel came from Kedesh to Mt.Tabor and defeated Sisera, chasing him to Harosheth-ha-goiim. Probably a cloudburst changed the river Kishon into a torrent which swept Sisera's chariots away. (5:21). Sisera fled on foot and arrived at the tent of Jael. She gave him a drink and allowed him to sleep. Whilst he slept she killed him, driving a tent peg through his temple. Deborah's song (chap. 5) is one of the most ancient pieces of writing in the Old Testament.

5. Gideon (Chapter 6)

Gideon (1162-1122 BC) was from Manasseh. The Midianites (bedouin) terrorized southern Israel, destroying crops and animals, causing Israelites to dwell in caves. Gideon was threshing his grain harvest in secret when he had a vision of an angel, calling him to deliver Israel. He protested his unworthiness but agreed to pull down the altar of Baal and the Asherah, replacing them with an altar to the Lord. Being afraid, he did it at night. His father protected him from the angry reaction of the people. The Midianites and the Amalekites camped in the valley of Jezreel and Gideon summoned the northern Israelite tribes to join him. He asked confirmation from God that he would give the victory. One night he put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor and asked God to allow the dew to be only on the fleece, not on the ground. This happened. The next night he asked that the fleece remain dry and the ground damp. This too, happened and Gideon was confident of victory. The Lord wanted only a small force to attack Midian. 22,000 fearful men were allowed to go home. God told Gideon to take only

those who at the Spring of Harod lapped water putting their hands to their mouth. This left Gideon with only 300 men.

That night, Gideon secretly entered the enemy camp and overheard a man telling of a 'prophetic' dream that Gideon would win. He returned to the Israelite force. Each man was given a trumpet and a torch in a jar. In the darkness they approached the enemy camp. Suddenly they broke the jars revealing the torch-light, blew the trumpets and shouted. In the confusion the enemy fled, fighting among themselves. Israel wanted Gideon to be king. He refused but accepted gifts to make a golden 'ephod' (probably an image of God, forbidden by the law). This, sadly, led Israel into further idolatry.

Gideon's son Abimelech succeeded in getting the city of Shechem to appoint him king. He killed all his brothers except Jotham the youngest who publicly opposed him. Shechem eventually turned against Abimelech. He fought successfully against them. However, when he attacked the tower in Thebez a woman dropped a millstone on his head and he died.

6. Tola (chap. 10:1)

Tola from Issachar was judge for 23 years.

7. Jair (chap. 10:3)

Jair from Gilead was judge for 22 years.

8. Jephthah (chap. 11:11)

Jephthah (1078-1072 BC) was from Gilead. He was a great brigand-chief and the son of a prostitute, therefore an outcast. But when Southern Israel was attacked by the Philistines and the Ammonites, the people of Gilead asked Jephthah to lead them to victory. Parleying with the enemy was unsuccessful so Jephthah vowed to sacrifice the first person to welcome him home after the battle if the Lord gave him victory. (This shows how far from God's law Israel had strayed). Sadly, after the victory, his daughter welcomed him home and eventually she was sacrificed. The Ephraimites attacked Jephthah because he had not enlisted their help. He defeated them and took control of the ford over the Jordan, waiting for Ephraimites to return. The password was 'shibboleth' because the Ephraimites could not make the 'sh' sound. Many Ephraimites died.

9. Ibzan (chap. 12:8)

Ibzan, from Bethlehem was judge for 7 years.

10. Elon (chap. 12:11)

Elon, from Zebulun, was judge for 10 years.

11. Abdon (chap. 12:13)

Abdon, from Ephraim, was judge for 8 years.

12. Samson (chap. 13-16)

Samson (1075-1055 BC) was from Dan. Manoah, his father, had a vision of an angel who said Samson would be born and he was to be a Nazirite (see Numbers 6). He would make a special vow to God that he would not take strong drink, not cut his hair, not go near a dead body nor eat anything unclean. Samson went to marry a Philistine woman from Timnah. On the way a lion attacked him. Given supernatural strength, he killed it. Some time later he passed the lion's body and a swarm of bees had built a honeycomb in it. At the wedding feast he gave the young men a riddle to guess: 'Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet.' To gain the reward the young men threatened Samson's wife, forcing her to find the answer for them. This succeeded and Samson killed some Philistines in order to provide the reward. Meanwhile, as in all this turmoil the marriage had not been consummated, his wife was given in marriage to his best man. So Samson caught 300 jackals (who hunt in packs rather than solitary foxes) and tying a torch to each pair's tails set fire to the Philistines crops. With his amazing strength he had other escapes and victories. Then he met Delilah

in the Valley of Sorek. The Philistines bribed her to discover the secret of his strength. He lied to her that his strength would fail if he were tied with bow strings or rope, or if his hair was woven. Eventually he told her that if his hair was cut and so the Nazirite vow was finally broken he would lose his strength. The Philistines captured Samson, blinded him and enslaved him. But his hair grew again and so his strength returned. One day at a feast in the temple of Dagon he managed to pull down a pillar supporting the roof. Samson with many Philistines died in the collapse of the building.

Micah, an Ephraimite, had a silver idol made. A visiting Levite agreed to stay and be Micah's priest. Some Danites, discovering this, took the idols and the Levite to be their own priest. Another Levite from Ephraim had a concubine who ran away. He found her and on their return journey they stayed at Gibeah. The men of the town demanded to have sexual relations with the Levite. Instead they were given the concubine to abuse. She died. On hearing of it, the other tribes demanded that the Benjaminites give up the men of Gibeah. They refused and civil war resulted, severely decimating the tribe of Benjamin.

The book ends: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes."

RUTH

During the time of the Judges, there was a famine, so Elimelech and Naomi with their sons Mahlon and Chilion made the 50 mile journey from Bethlehem (earlier called Ephrath or Ephrathah) to Moab, beyond the Dead Sea. The sons married Moabite wives Orpah and Ruth. In time the three men died.

Naomi heard that the famine in Israel was over so she set out to return with Orpah and Ruth. But she gave them the opportunity to return to their mother's home. At first they refused, but then Orpah returned to her mother, hoping to find another husband. However, Ruth insisted on going with Naomi and said "Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God; where you die I will die and there I will be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you" (chap. 1:16-17). So Ruth forsook Moabite gods for the Lord. They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest in April.

The Levitical law laid down that gleanings from the harvest were to be left for the poor. So Ruth began to glean in the common open field. It so happened that she did this in the part belonging to Boaz, a rich relative of Elimelech's. When Boaz discovered who she was, he arranged that she should have a favoured position for gleaning, be protected from any improper approach by the men, and be provided with drinking water. Ruth was overcome by his kindness but he explained that he had heard of her kindness to Naomi.

After a meal Boaz instructed his young men to let Ruth glean amongst the sheaves i.e. before they had finished reaping. They were also to leave for her small amounts from their bundles of barley. So Ruth gleaned about 22 litres of barley. When Naomi heard about Boaz she thanked God for His goodness.

The Levirate law stated that if a man's brother died, leaving his wife childless he was to raise an heir to him by the widow. The law extended to the next of kin and although Boaz was not the next of kin, Ruth decided to claim this right. On Naomi's instruction she went down to the threshing floor one evening. After his meal, Boaz slept outside to guard the grain. When he was asleep Ruth went, uncovered his feet, and lay at his feet. At midnight he turned over and was startled to see Ruth lying there. She asked him to spread the skirt of his robe over her - a symbol of claiming a widow in marriage, practised amongst the early Arabs. Boaz blessed her and promised to take her as his wife. In the morning he gave her some barley and sent her home before anyone saw her. A custom which was later written down in law stated that if a man had intercourse with a Gentile woman he could not then fulfil the Levirate law for her. Boaz didn't want to risk being thought to have done this.

Later Boaz went down to the gate of Bethlehem. This was where the 'elders' gathered to make decisions on legal and civil matters. He gathered ten elders and spoke to Elimelech's next of kin who was passing by. This man had the responsibility to fulfil the Levirate law. Boaz explained before the elders that Naomi was selling Elimelech's land. The next of kin was called upon to buy it (to keep it in the family) but also, said Boaz, in this case would have to take Ruth too. The next of kin protested he could not afford to do all this and offered the rights to Boaz. If a widow's brother-in-law failed to obey the Levirate law she could forcibly remove his sandal and spit in his face. In this case the next of kin was not Ruth's brother-in-law and Boaz was happy to marry her. So a modified custom was carried out. The next of kin removed his sandal and gave it to Boaz as a public sign of handing over the rights to 'redeem' Elimelech's land and Ruth.

So Ruth was 'redeemed' and became Boaz's wife. She had a son Obed who was father of Jesse and grandfather of King David. It was, of course, from David's descendants that the Messiah was born. So Ruth, the foreigner from Moab who showed such love to her Israelite mother-in-law, became an ancestor of Christ.

1 SAMUEL: Samuel and Saul

Birth of Samuel

Elkanah had two wives - Peninnah and Hannah. Hannah was childless and despised by Peninnah. Each year the family left Ramah (or Ramathaim Zophim) to offer a sacrifice in the tabernacle at Shiloh. On one such occasion Eli the priest saw Hannah praying silently in distress and thought she was drunk. She had been promising God that if he gave her a son, he would be dedicated to God under a Nazirite vow. Eli prayed God would grant her request. Eventually, Samuel was born and when he was about 2 or 3 he was brought to Eli to assist him. Eli's sons were abusing their position. They took the best meat from the sacrificial animals before the sacrifice and they brought prostitution into the worship of God. Eli seemed incapable of disciplining them. A prophet told Eli that his sons would die as a punishment and be replaced by a faithful priest.

Call of Samuel

One night Samuel heard a voice calling him. Three times he went to Eli who then realised that it was God calling Samuel. God told Samuel that judgment was about to come on Eli's family. Reluctantly next morning he told Eli. Samuel soon became established as a prophet throughout the land.

Capture of the ark of the covenant

Israel attacked the Philistines at Aphek but were defeated, so they decided to take the ark with them into battle. Eli's two sons accompanied it. The Philistines were very afraid that Israel had brought 'a god' into battle with them. But Israel was defeated, Eli's sons killed and the ark captured. When Eli heard the news he fell in shock, broke his neck and died. He had judged Israel for 40 years.

The Philistines took the ark south to Ashdod and put it in the temple of Dagon. They were implying Dagon was a superior god. The next morning they found the image of Dagon lying broken before the ark. What is more, bubonic plague broke out wherever the ark was. (This was caused by rats, hence the reference to "mice" in 6:4). After seven months the Philistines decided to return the ark but in a way which would check if it was Israel's God who had caused their trouble. They yoked two cows to a cart carrying the ark. Their calves were taken away. Normally the cows would return to them, but instead the cows drew the cart away to the border of Israel without looking back. This was a sign to the Philistines that it was the Lord who had had judged them. So from Ekron the ark arrived back in Bethshemesh. There was great rejoicing but sadly 70 men died because they had dared to look inside the ark, which was forbidden (see Exodus - The Ritual Law). So the ark remained for 20 years at Kiriath-Jearim.

The call for a king

Samuel gathered all Israel together at Mizpah to repent before God. The Philistines seized the opportunity to attack them but ended up in fear and confusion in a great thunderstorm. Israel was able to defeat them easily. During Samuel's life, Ekron and Gath were won back by Israel. Samuel did an annual circuit as judge, to Bethel, Gilgal and Mizpah.

In his old age, Samuel appointed his sons as judges, but they were little better than Eli's sons. So the leaders of Israel came to Ramah to ask Samuel to appoint a king. Samuel was displeased but God said they had rejected him not Samuel, and he was to warn them of the military and financial demands of a king. Israel still insisted they wanted a king.

Saul anointed king

Saul's father's donkeys were lost and this brought Saul from Gibea to Ramah. He decided to consult the prophet Samuel as to the animals' whereabouts. God had warned Samuel that the future king would come to him that day, and confirmed that Saul was the man. Samuel told him the donkeys were safe and asked him to eat with him. Next morning, Samuel secretly anointed Saul king and, as a confirmation, told Saul he would find the donkeys safely back home. Furthermore, he would experience ecstatic prophecy with a band of prophets he would meet on the way.

Saul publicly proclaimed king

Samuel gathered Israel together and God publicly confirmed that Saul was king, by the process of casting lots. Saul had hidden himself but was found and proclaimed king. Soon the Ammonites besieged Jabesh Gilead. Saul gathered Israel and defeated them. All those Israelites who had not accepted Saul were won over by this victory. A more public 'coronation' ceremony was held at Gilgal. Samuel warned the people that choosing a king was a step away from having God only as king. If they ceased to honour the Lord as their king, both the monarchy and the nation would be destroyed.

Saul's victories

Saul's son Jonathan defeated the Philistine garrison at Geba. The Philistines advanced in great numbers and many Israelites fled into hiding. Saul waited for Samuel until the seventh day when he was due to arrive. But Samuel didn't arrive so Saul foolishly usurped the priestly functions and offered the burnt offerings himself. Samuel arrived soon afterwards and told Saul that because of his sin, his sons would not succeed him on the throne.

Jonathan and his armour bearer, posing as deserters, attacked the Philistine garrison at Michmash (just north of Geba). Panic broke out and was worsened by earth tremors.

When Saul realised what was happening, he wished to consult the Lord, before attacking. The priest brought the ephod with the urim and thummim (see "Exodus: the revealing of the law"). (One ancient version of the book in Chapter 14:18 refers to the "ephod" not the "ark" and is probably correct). But even then, Saul was too impatient to wait for the answer and attacked the Philistines. Saul made the people swear not to eat until the victory was won. This distressed the people and Jonathan, who did not know of the oath, ate some wild honey, thus coming under Saul's curse. After the victory, the starving Israelites ate meat with blood in it (which was forbidden by the law) until Saul stopped them. The same night, Saul consulted the Lord through the urim and thummini as to whether he should attack again. Receiving no answer, he realised someone had sinned. Using the urim and thummim again he discovered Jonathan's unwitting sin of breaking the oath of fasting. Saul said Jonathan must die, but the people pressed for him to be forgiven in view of his great courage. So Saul left the rest of the Philistines to go to their homeland. Saul had many victories against Moab, the Ammonites, Edom and others.

Saul rejected as king by God

Later, Samuel told Saul he was to destroy the Amalekites and take no spoil. Saul, however, deliberately disobeyed by saving Agag, king of the Amalekites, and the best of the spoil for himself. Samuel announced that because of this, Saul was rejected as king. Samuel executed Agag and paid no more official visits to Saul.

1 SAMUEL – Saul and David (chap. 16-31)

David anointed king (chap. 16).

The Lord rebuked Samuel for mourning over Saul's rejection and told him to visit the family of Jesse, in Bethlehem. One of Jesse's sons would become king. Samuel (who was afraid of Saul's reaction) was told to go to Bethlehem to offer sacrifice and invite Jesse to join him. Samuel met seven of Jesse's sons, but knew none of them was chosen. The youngest - David - was away keeping the sheep. He was brought to Samuel who recognised he was God's choice and anointed him.

Meanwhile, Saul was troubled by evil forces. Music soothed him when he was plunged into black depression and violence. A musician was therefore sought and David (who played the lyre) was suggested. Saul grew to love David and made him his amour-bearer.

David kills Goliath (chap. 17).

The Philistine army came against Israel just north of Adullam. Their champion - Goliath from Gath - was ten feet tall and fully armed. David's brothers were in Saul's army and he took some provisions for them. No-one dared attack Goliath. Saul promised great riches and his daughter in marriage to anyone who defeated the giant. David offered to kill Goliath with his sling - used to kill wild animals which attacked the sheep. Saul eventually agreed, so David - unable to wear Saul's amour - approached Goliath armed only with the sling. But his first shot brought the mocking Goliath down. David killed him with a sword. The Philistines fled. (N.B. chap. 17:55-58 seems to imply Saul didn't know David, whereas chapter 16 shows he did. Maybe the Goliath incident happened very early in David's visits to Saul, and chapter 16:21-22 refer to a later time, or chapter 17:55-58 may be simply a routine enquiry into the 'pedigree' of a young man who was to have the king's daughter as wife).

Saul grows jealous of David (chap. 18 - 20)

Jonathan, Saul's son, developed a deep friendship with David and Saul put David over his warriors. But David became so successful that Saul grew jealous. Twice during his depressions he threw a spear at David. Later he offered his eldest daughter Merab to David but gave her to another man at the last minute. Then Saul's youngest daughter Michal fell in love with David. Saul offered her to David so long as David killed a hundred Philistines. He hoped David would be killed in so doing, but David succeeded unharmed, so Saul asked Jonathan and his servants to kill David. Jonathan warned David and successfully persuaded his father not to have David killed. But later, Saul again tried to kill David with his spear. David fled home. Michal warned David he was being watched. She let him down from the window and, using an image and a pillow, made the bed look as if David was in it and ill.

So David fled to Samuel at Ramah. Samuel led the school of prophets who displayed a very powerful anointing by the Holy Spirit. Three times Saul sent messengers to take David, but they were 'taken over' by the powerful spirit of prophecy. Finally, Saul himself came and experienced the same thing. David fled and discussed his situation with Jonathan who promised to sound out his father's attitude to David during the new moon feast. By the third day of the feast, Saul missed David, and Jonathan made the excuse that David had gone to sacrifice at Bethlehem. Saul was so angry that he threw his spear at Jonathan. Jonathan reported secretly to David and they parted, having sworn eternal friendship.

David flees from Saul (chap. 21-23)

David fled to Nob where the tabernacle was and asked Ahimelech - the priest - for bread. There was no bread except the holy bread in the Holy Place. Ahimelech - deceived into thinking David was on an errand from Saul - allowed him to eat the holy bread. David was unarmed, so Ahimelech allowed him to take Goliath's sword. From there, David went to Gath, where he pretended to be mad in order to escape from King Achish. On he travelled to the cave of Adullam. About 400 men - relatives, friends, those in trouble or discontented with Saul - joined him there. Moab was his next destination. He left his parents there for safety. The prophet Gad, told him to return to Judah. Meanwhile, Saul discovered that Ahimelech had helped David, and ordered the slaughter of some 85 priests with Ahimelech. (Psalm 52 refers to this incident.)

Abiathar, one of Ahimelech's sons, escaped to tell David and was made David's priest. The Philistines attacked Keilah, and David defeated them. When Saul heard David was in Keilah, he advanced to capture him, but David with his 600 men escaped to the hill country around Ziph. There Jonathan visited him and encouraged him. But the Ziphites went to Saul at Gibeah and told him where David was. Saul pursued David to Maon and had almost caught him when a message came that the Philistines had invaded the land. So Saul returned and David went to Engedi.

David spares Saul's life at Engedi (chap. 24)

Later, by a remarkable coincidence, Saul entered a cave at Engedi to relieve himself, and David with his men, was hiding deeper in the same cave. David would not attack the Lord's anointed king, but he stealthily cut off part of Saul's robe without Saul knowing it. Then David called after Saul to tell him how he had spared his life out of loyalty. Saul repented of his attitude towards David.

David and Nabal (chap. 25)

Samuel died and was buried at Ramah. David sent ten of his young men to a rich sheep farmer Nabal, at Carmel (near Maon) to ask some provisions. David had shown kindness to Nabal's men, but Nabal refused the request. So David led 400 men against him. Nabal's wife, Abigail, heard of this and quickly prepared generous gifts for David without telling her husband. She met David and apologised for Nabal's attitude. When Nabal heard of this he had a double stroke and soon died. Abigail became David's wife.

David spares Saul again (chap. 26)

Again Saul came after David at the instigation of the Ziphites. By night, David and Abishai entered Saul's camp and took a spear and water jar from next to the sleeping Saul. Then, from a distance, David called to Abner – Saul's commander in chief, and told him what had happened. Again Saul repented of his antagonism to David. But for safety, David and his 600 men went to live amongst the Philistines at Gath. King Achish of Gath allowed them to take over Ziklag. To keep Achish happy, David told him he was attacking Israel, but in fact David was attacking various enemies of Israel. So when the Philistines prepared to fight Israel, David was made Achish's bodyguard.

Saul consults a medium (chap. 23)

Meanwhile Saul disguised himself and went to consult a medium at Endor (near the Sea of Galilee). He asked her to conjure up Samuel. Samuel did indeed appear (possibly to the great surprise of the medium) and told Saul he had been rejected by God, that Israel would be defeated by the Philistines and that Saul and his sons would be killed.

David defeats Amalekite raiders (chap. 30).

The Philistines gathered at Aphek and Israel at Jezreel. The other Philistine kings forced Achish to send David home to Ziklag. On his arrival he found the Amalekites had attacked Ziklag and captured Abigail, amongst others. David pursued them, defeated them and restored all the captives and spoil to Ziklag.

Saul's death (chap. 31)

Meanwhile, Israel was defeated at Mount Gilboa, Saul's sons were killed and Saul wounded. Saul killed himself to avoid being degraded by the Philistines. The Philistines fixed the bodies of Saul and his sons on the walls of Bethshan. But the men of Jabesh-Gilead (grateful for Saul's earlier deliverance of them) took the bodies by night, and buried them at Jabesh.

2 SAMUEL - David's kingdom established (chap. 1-12)

David mourns the death of Saul (chap. 1)

An Amalekite who had escaped from Saul's camp arrived at Ziklag, having walked the hundred miles from Gilboa. He announced to David the defeat and death of Saul. Perhaps in order to gain David's favour he lied, claiming he had killed Saul at the latter's request. David and his men began a period of sincere mourning for Saul and Jonathan. The young Amalekite was executed for (allegedly) killing the Lord's anointed King. David showed his poetic skill in the beautiful lament for Saul and Jonathan (chap.1:19-27).

David anointed King of Judah (chap. 2)

After seeking God's guidance David moved to Hebron where the men of Judah anointed him as their king. But Abner, Saul's commander in chief had made Ishbosheth, Saul's son, King of Israel at Mahanaim. Abner and Joab (David's nephew) sought to settle the dispute. They each brought twelve young men to Gibeon to fight each other. Whichever side won, their leader was the rightful king. But all the young men died. In the ensuing civil war Abner was beaten by David's forces. Asahel, Joab's brother, pursued Abner but was killed by him. The Benjaminites rallied around Abner and he persuaded Joab to stop fighting for a time.

The death of Abner and Ishbosheth (chap. 3 - 4)

Civil war continued, with David gaining advantage. Abner became disillusioned with Ishbosheth who was a weak man, and they quarrelled over Abner having intercourse with one of Saul's concubines. This action was tantamount to a claim to the throne. The quarrel resulted in Abner deciding to support David. David accepted Abner so long as he returned Michal, whom Saul had given as wife to another man. Abner met David and promised to turn all Israel to follow him. When Joab heard this, he sent messengers asking Abner to return. On seeing him Joab murdered him to avenge Asahel. David heard what had happened and sincerely and publicly mourned Abner, condemning the murder. Soon after the news of Abner's death reached Ishbosheth he was assassinated by two of his servants. They brought his head to David, thinking they would gain favour, but David had them executed for their crime.

David anointed King of all Israel and takes Jerusalem (chap. 5)

The leaders of all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron to anoint him their king. Soon afterwards, David led a successful raid on the defiant fortress at Jebus (Jerusalem) and made it his capital. Twice the Philistines attacked in the valley of Rephaim (between Jerusalem and Bethlehem) but were defeated by David.

The ark brought to Jerusalem (chap. 6)

Eventually David went to bring the ark of the covenant from Bethshemesh. As it was brought back on a cart there was great rejoicing with singing and playing. At one point the oxen stumbled and Uzzah, one of the drivers of the cart, touched the ark to stop it falling. Not even the Levites were allowed to do this and Uzzah was struck dead as a result. (This may seem harsh, but the idea behind the ark and the holy of holies was that God was majestic, holy and unapproachable. This was very important as a preparation for the New Testament Gospel. Also, Uzzah and David should have known better than to touch the ark). Three months later the ark was brought to Jerusalem. David, amidst the general rejoicing, danced publicly before the Lord and Michal despised him for this.

God promises Israel's throne to David's descendants forever (chap. 7-8).

David discussed with Nathan, the prophet, building a temple to replace the tabernacle. God spoke to David through Nathan and said that David was not to do so. He had shed much blood in his battles (1 Chronicles 22:7-10) and so Solomon, David's son, a man of peace, would build the temple. However, the Lord promised that the throne of Israel would belong to David's family for ever. Hence Jesus born in David's birthplace, and of his family, inherited the throne of David. David responded with a beautiful prayer of praise.

In his wars, David defeated the Philistines and the Moabites (previously friendly, as David's great grandmother

Ruth was a Moabitess). He defeated Hadadezar king of Zobah and the Syrians who came as his allies. King Tou of Hamath therefore made peace with David. Also, David conquered the Edomites south of the Dead Sea (see Psalm 60),

David and Mephibosheth (chap. 9-10)

By contrast, David asked Ziba - a servant in Saul's family - if there was any surviving member of Saul's family who could be shown kindness. So Mephibosheth, the physically handicapped son of Jonathan, was brought to David who gave him many material benefits and arranged for him to eat at the king's table.

The Ammonite king died and his son, suspicious of ambassadors who came from David, publicly humiliated them. He then enlisted Syrian support to fight against Israel, but Joab and Abishai (nephews of David) led Israel to victory. However the Syrian force recovered and enlisted other Syrians as reinforcements, but were defeated by David at Helam.

David and Bathsheba (chap. 11-12)

Late one spring afternoon, David was walking on the roof of the palace when he saw Bathsheba bathing. He sent for her and committed adultery with her. She became pregnant and so David, to cover his sin, re-called her husband Uriah from battle and encouraged him to go and sleep with his wife, but Uriah, according to the rule for men involved in battle, did not do so. David got him drunk, but still he did not go to Bathsheba. So David told Joab to put Uriah in a place in the fighting where he was certain to be killed. After Uriah's death, David took Bathsheba as his wife.

However, Nathan the Prophet rebuked David and made him see the greatness of his sin. The baby born to Bathsheba fell ill and a week later died. During all this time, David was terribly upset, as Psalm 51 shows. Later, Bathsheba became the mother of Solomon.

David overcomes revolt (chap. 13–24)

Absalom kills Amnon (chap. 13-14)

David's son Amnon raped his half sister Tamar. On hearing of it, David, although angry, showed himself a weak father by taking no action. Two years later, Absalom (Tamar's true brother) avenged the rape by arranging Amnon's death. He then fled to Geshur. David was very deeply upset at all this. So Joab decided on a plan. He arranged for a woman to approach David saying that one of her sons had murdered the other. Her family wanted the murderer killed, but she didn't. David, unaware the story was false, agreed that the son should live. The woman then asked David why he would not do the same for Absalom. She admitted that Joab was behind her story and David gave him permission to bring Absalom home. So Absalom returned but for two years David would not see him.

Absalom proclaimed king (chap. 15:1-12)

Absalom was a very handsome man. He deliberately curried favour with people who came to Jerusalem to consult David on matters of justice. He often told them he wished he could be judge in Israel, so they could receive fair judgments. He was now next in line to the throne, but David had chosen Solomon as his heir. So Absalom left for Hebron, secretly sending messages throughout Israel saying "Absalom is king in Hebron."

David flees across the Jordan (chap. 15:13-16; 23)

On hearing this David fled with his household. Absalom had won over Ahithophel, David's far-sighted adviser. So David sent Hushai the Archite to outwit Ahithophel by contradicting his advice. Ziba (Mephibosheth's servant) claimed that his master was hoping to gain David's throne. Mephibosheth later explained this was a lie. Shimei, one of Saul's family, cursed David and threw stones at him. But David would not have him punished. Absalom reached Jerusalem and on Ahithophel's advice took over David's harem. This political move was so insulting to David that the people would think Absalom could never be reconciled to David. This would strengthen Absalom's position.

Hushai contradicts Ahithophel's advice (chap. 17:1-23)

Ahithophel also advised Absalom to send a force after David with the sole aim of killing him as an individual. But Hushai advised waiting until the whole of Israel gathered behind Absalom. In his vanity, Absalom approved of Hushai's advice. Hushai sent a secret message to David, telling him to cross the Jordan before day-break. Ahithophel could foresee the disastrous consequences of Hushai's advice, so he went away and committed suicide.

The death of Absalom (chap. 17:2-18:15)

David reached Mahanaim and Absalom crossed the Jordan in pursuit of him. David divided his men under Joab, Abishai and Ittai the Gittite. He instructed them to deal gently with Absalom. They defeated Absalom's forces and he fled. Absalom had very long hair (he cut it once a year and the weight of it was some 4 lbs!) and when he rode under a low oak tree his hair caught in the branches. His ass left him hanging there helpless. Joab attacked him cruelly and Absalom was killed.

David restored as king (chap. 18:16-24:25)

David sank into grief and remorse to such an extent that Joab had to speak very sharply to him, otherwise the people would have concluded David thought more of Absalom than he did of them. David composed himself and attempted to win Judah back to himself. He forgave Shimei, Ziba and Mephibosheth. However, the rest of Israel became envious of David's attitude to Judah. After all, Judah had led the rebellion. Amasa (David's nephew and Absalom's commander in chief) was sent to gather Judah to David. But Joab murdered him. Sheba, a Benjaminite, led a rebellion of the rest of Israel against David. Joab pursued him to Beth Maacah (near Dan) and laid siege to the town. The inhabitants executed Sheba to save themselves.

Chapter 21:1-14 tells a story which may have happened before Mephibosheth came to David in Chapter 9. Joshua (in Joshua chap.9: 3-27) had been tricked into making a pact with Gibeon. But Saul had killed some of the Gibeonites. David agreed to their demand that seven of Saul's family should be executed but he saved Mephibosheth.

Saul and Jonathan's remains were properly buried in the family tomb. The Philistines attacked again. David, getting too old for war, was almost killed, but Abishai saved him. Four further Philistine 'giants' were killed in yet another war against the Philistines (chap. 21:19 says Elhanan killed Goliath. The text may be confused here and really read "brother of Goliath" - see 1 Chronicles Chap.20:5. Or maybe another champion had taken the name Goliath).

Chapter 22 records David's song of victory which is almost identical with Psalm 18. After this is recorded possibly the last piece of poetry by David about what makes a good ruler, and about God's promise of an eternal kingdom. The exploits of David's great warriors are briefly recorded.

But sadly the book ends with David incurring God's displeasure by taking a census of the people. Possibly the sin was to rely on numbers rather than on God. Plague broke out amongst the people. After this the prophet Gad instructed David to buy the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite and to build an altar there. This was to become the site of the Temple in Jerusalem.

1 KINGS - The reign of Solomon (chap. 1 - 11)

Solomon anointed king (chap. 1)

The date was about 971BC. David was very old and had to be nursed by Abishag from Shunem near Nazareth. She may have been one of David's concubines and one of her responsibilities was to try to keep the old king warm. Adonijah (David's eldest son) with the support of Joab and Abiathar the priest, tried to seize the throne. Nathan the prophet advised Bathsheba to inform David of this so that he could swear to her that Solomon would be king. Nathan also went to David to confirm the facts. David ordered that Zadok the priest and Nathan should anoint Solomon king just outside Jerusalem. On hearing this Adonijah fled to take sanctuary near the altar. Solomon allowed him to go free.

Solomon removes all opposition (chap. 2)

David charged Solomon to obey God and blessed him. However, he suggested that Solomon should bring judgment upon Joab for killing Abner and Amasa and upon Shimei for cursing David. So David died after forty years as king.

Adonijah approached Bathsheba to ask for Abishag as his wife. Solomon took this (according to the custom of the times) as a claim to the throne and had Adonijah executed. Abiathar was dismissed from being priest, Joab was executed and Shimei was ordered never to leave Jerusalem. (Three years later Shimei left Jerusalem to retrieve some runaway slaves. As a result he was executed).

Solomon receives the gift of wisdom (chap. 3)

Solomon made a marriage alliance with Egypt by marrying Pharaoh's daughter. He obeyed the Lord but both he and the people offered sacrifices at the "high places." These were Canaanite shrines often on hill tops. Before long the worship there became mixed with paganism, and the later prophets condemned the high places. At Gibeon where the Tabernacle was, the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream and offered to grant him a special request. Solomon asked for wisdom to rule the nation. God promised not only to give him wisdom but also great riches and honour. One example of Solomon's wisdom is given. Two prostitutes approached him with a baby, each claiming the child was hers. To decide which was the true mother, Solomon advised dividing the child in two. One woman protested and said the other may have the child. The other woman spitefully, suggested killing the child, as Solomon had said, so neither of them would have him, Solomon therefore knew that the former woman was the true mother,

Solomon sets up his administration (chap. 4)

Solomon planned an effective administration for the country. The land was divided into twelve districts. Each district had to provide food for the king's court for one month of each year. The kingdom extended from the Euphrates to Philistia and to the Egyptian border. The twelve district governors reported to the governor of the whole land. Solomon also appointed court secretaries, a records officer, adviser, palace steward and minister in charge of forced labour. Solomon's wisdom was famous. He produced many proverbs and songs.

Solomon builds the temple (chaps 5 - 9)

Solomon arranged to obtain cedars of Lebanon from Hiram, king of Tyre, in order to build the temple. The building was 90 feet long x 30 feet wide by 45 feet high (30m x 9m x 13.5m). There were two sections and part of the inner section was curtained off to form the sanctuary. There was a 15 ft. porch and store rooms along the sides. The stone was prepared deep in a quarry so that the holiness of the site would not be disturbed by noise. The walls of each room were panelled with cedar carved with flowers, palm trees and cherubim and overlaid, with gold. The holy place was dimly lit by high windows but the holy of holies was completely dark. The priests and Levites (who alone could enter the temple) burnt incense in the building but animal sacrifices were made in the courtyard outside. Two cherubim 15 feet high, made from olive wood overlaid with gold, stood over the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies with their wings touching each wall of the sanctuary. Two large decorative bronze pillars were placed outside the door. In addition, Solomon made a huge bowl (or "sea of cast metal") which held 10,000 gallons of water, ten wheeled stands holding other bowls and many smaller vessels.

(Solomon also built the House of the Forest of Lebanon - possibly an armoury - the Hall of Pillars, Hall of Judgement and palaces for himself and Pharaoh's daughter).

The ark was then brought and put in the temple. The cloud, signifying God's glory and presence, filled the building. Solomon dedicated the temple - praying for the royal family and the nation. He asked God to hear prayer and forgive sin as they look to the temple. He blessed the people and offered sacrifice. Then there were parties throughout the land. The Lord again appeared to Solomon and repeated the blessings for obedience and the warnings against disobedience.

Solomon is visited by the Queen of Sheba (chap. 10)

The king's labour force consisted of Canaanite slaves and Israelites who did short term forced labour. He created a merchant navy which traded with Arabia and beyond. The famous visit of the Queen of Sheba (from the Yemen) took place. He answered all her test-questions and dazzled her with his wealth.

Solomon falls into idolatry (chap. 11)

However Solomon showed a serious lack of wisdom in a very important area. He made many political marriage alliances - he had 700 wives, princesses and 300 concubines. And they brought foreign gods with them. Their worship involved child sacrifice, fertility rites, prostitution and sexual deviation. Sadly, Solomon began to worship idols in his old age. As a punishment, God promised to take away the Kingdom from Solomon's son and to give it to his servant. Hadad of Edom, and Rezon of Damascus were enemies of Israel as was Jereboam, the son of Nebat, Solomon's servant. The prophet Ahijah told Jereboam he would become king over all Israel except Judah and Benjamin. Solomon therefore tried to kill him, but he fled to Egypt. So Solomon died after 40 years reign. His son, Rehoboam became king (about 931 BC.)

The kingdom divided and the prophet Elijah (chap. 12-22)

The nation divides (chap. 12:1-20)

Only common worship of one God could hold the twelve tribes together. Solomon's idolatry therefore led to the break up of the kingdom. When Jereboam heard Rehoboam had been made king in Shechem he returned from Egypt. Backed by the Northern tribes, he asked Rehoboam to be easier on the people than Solomon had been. Rehoboam rejected advice from his counsellors and threatened worse oppression. The northern tribes declared independence and assassinated Rehoboam's taskmaster over the forced labour. Rehoboam fled to Jerusalem and the rebel tribes made Jereboam their king.

Jereboam sets up idols at Dan and Bethel (chap. 12:21-13:34)

Rehoboam gathered the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (from now on called Judah) to fight against the rebel tribes (from now on called Israel). But they heeded the warning of a prophet not to fight. Jereboam didn't want the people to regard Jerusalem as their religious centre so he set up idols (golden calves) at Dan and Bethel, with a priesthood who were not Levites. A man of God came from Judah to Jereboam at Bethel. He prophesied that a later king Josiah would destroy the idolatry. When Jereboam tried to attack the man of God, his hand was paralysed and the altar was destroyed. Jereboam asked the man of God to pray for his healing and Jereboam's hand was restored. On his return journey the man of God was invited by an old prophet to stay for a meal. God had told the man of God not to delay but the old prophet lied that God had given a different message now. The man of God was later killed by a lion as a punishment for disobedience. Jereboam continued with his disobedience.

Death of Jereboam (chap. 14)

Jereboam's son Abijah fell ill and Jereboam asked his wife to disguise herself and to consult the prophet Ahijah in Shiloh. But God revealed to Ahijah who it was. He prophesied to her that no male heir of Jereboam would survive because of his idolatry. After 22 years reign Jereboam died. Rehoboam reigned 17 years but fell into idolatry and Shishak, King of Egypt, invaded Judah, stealing the temple treasures.

Kings of Judah (chap. 15:1-24)

(Dates approximate - some kings may have overlapped i.e. one being regent in the time of his predecessor)

- 913-911BC Abijah - an idolater
- 911-870BC Asa - a good king who continued the war against King Baasha of Israel and made an alliance with King Benhadad of Syria asking him to attack Israel from the North.

Kings of Israel (chap. 15:25-16:34)

The kings of Israel were all idolaters:

- 910-909BC Nadab - murdered by Baasha.
- 909-886BC Baasha
- 886-885BC Elah - son of Baasha murdered by Zimri (as was all Baasha's family according to Jehu's prophecy)
- 885BC Zimri - committed suicide when besieged by Omri, commander of Israel's army, who also overcame a rival - Tibni.
- 885-874 BC Omri - a powerful king who fortified Samaria as his new capital
- 874-853BC Ahab - Omri's son who married the evil Jezebel of Tyre. They introduced the corrupt worship of Melqart (the "Baal")

Elijah prophesies drought, the widow of Zarephath (chap. 17)

Baal was said to be the weather god, so the Lord showed through Elijah that he alone had power over sun and rain. Elijah, from Tishbe, told Ahab there would be no dew or rain for three years. At God's prompting, Elijah hid by the Brook Cherith drinking its water and eating the raven's food. When the brook dried up God sent him to Zarephath, where a widow shared her last food with him. Elijah answered her that her jar of meal and cruse of oil would miraculously not run out until the drought was over. But later the widow's son fell ill and died. Elijah prayed for him, gave him the kiss of life and he revived.

The contest on Mt. Carmel (chap. 18)

After three years the Lord told Elijah to return to Ahab and to tell him rain would come. He met Obadiah (Ahab's steward). When Jezebel had executed the prophets of the Lord, Obadiah had hidden 100 of them in a cave. Fearfully he returned to Ahab saying he had found Elijah. Elijah challenged Ahab to gather 850 prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel. Both Elijah and the prophets of Baal were to provide an altar and sacrifice, but no fire. Each would pray to his God and the God who sent down fire was the true God. The prophets of Baal, taunted by Elijah, prayed first, but nothing happened. Then Elijah soaked his altar and sacrifice with water and prayed. Fire (lightning?) fell and consumed the sacrifice and altar to the Lord. The people worshipped the Lord and the prophets of Baal were executed. Soon afterwards the rains came and the drought ended.

Elijah at Mt. Sinai: Elisha anointed (chap .19)

When Jezebel heard what had happened she threatened Elijah's life and he fled to Beersheba. Spiritually and physically exhausted, he became deeply depressed. He moved on to Mt. Sinai (Horeb) still depressed and feeling sorry for himself. There was a strong wind, an earthquake and fire but God did not reveal himself in them. Rather afterwards he spoke with "a gentle whisper." He told Elijah to anoint Hazael king of Syria, Jehu king of Israel, and Elisha to be his successor as prophet. They would bring judgement on Israel's idolatry. Elisha was 'anointed' - called to be a prophet - by Elijah throwing his cloak round him.

Israel defeats Syria (chap. 20)

Benhadad, king of Syria, with the kings of 32 city states, attacked Israel twice but both times was defeated. Ahab spared his life. A prophet foretold that because Ahab had disobeyed God in not executing Benhadad serious trouble would come to Israel.

Death of Ahab (chap. 21-22)

Ahab asked Naboth for his vineyard in Jezreel but was refused. Jezebel therefore arranged for Naboth to be

falsely accused of blasphemy and executed. God sent Elijah to Ahab to pronounce judgement on him, Jezebel and his family. Ahab repented and the Lord postponed the sentence for three years. Ahab made an alliance with King Jehoshaphat of Judah (873-848 BC) to fight Syria. They consulted their prophets. Only Micaiah prophesied truly that the battle would be a disaster. Although in disguise Ahab was killed in battle. Jehoshaphat survived to be a good king of Judah, serving the Lord.

2 KINGS: The prophet Elisha (chap. 1-13)

Ahaziah of Israel (853-852BC) (chap.1)

Ahab's son, Ahaziah became king and was an idol worshipper. When injured in a fall he consulted Baalzebul (the god of Ekron) as to whether he would die. ("Baalzebul" is a rude pun of the god's real name and means "lord of the flies"). Elijah sent the king's messengers back with a rebuke and Ahaziah sent three groups of soldiers to bring Elijah. Only the third survived to bring Elijah who told Ahaziah he would die. His brother Jehoram succeeded him as king of Israel at the same time as the son of Jehoshaphat - also called Jehoram - was king of Judah.

Death of Elijah (chap. 2: 1-12)

Elijah knew that his life was drawing to a close. Elisha insisted on accompanying him across the Jordan. He asked Elijah for a double portion of his spirit. Soon afterwards Elijah disappeared in a whirlwind whilst Elisha had a vision of a chariot and horses of fire.

Elisha's miracles (chap. 2:13-25)

Elisha returned to the acclamation of the groups of prophets. Using "salt" he purified the water source of a local town. At Bethel some young men (not young boys) yelled abuse at him. This was a reflection of their parents' attitudes to the vital and God-given Ministry of Elisha. He cursed them and judgment came through a natural disaster.

Jehoram (or Joram) of Israel (852-841BC) (chap. 3)

Mesha king of Moab rebelled against Jehoram of Israel. Therefore Jehoram with Jehoshaphat of Judah and the king of Edom marched against Moab. However the drought conditions threatened to overcome them, so Elisha was consulted. He prophesied an end to the drought and victory over Moab. The next morning water flowed into the area from distant storms. The Moabites, not knowing of the rains, mistook the water in the red morning sun for blood, and assumed the three kings had attacked each other. So they went out to the camp of Israel. The battle went against Moab so king Mesha sacrificed his son to his god. This encouraged the Moabites and terrified the Israelites who returned home.

Further miracles of Elisha (chap. 4)

A widow asked Elisha's help before her children were to be sold as slaves to pay her debts. He miraculously multiplied the oil she had in her jar to the extent that she paid her debts from the sale of the oil. A wealthy woman and her husband who lived in Shunem gave generous hospitality to Elisha. The woman was childless and Elisha prophesied that she would have a son. A few years later the boy died of sunstroke and Elisha brought him back to life with actions similar to mouth to mouth resuscitation. A band of prophets were eating a stew containing Colocynths, a powerful laxative - poisonous in quantity. Elisha added meal to it and the poisonous qualities were overcome. A miracle of multiplying bread also took place.

The healing of Naaman (chap. 5)

Naaman, Syria's commander-in-chief, contracted leprosy. His Israelite slave girl told him of Elisha's powers. Through diplomatic channels Naaman contacted Elisha, who sent a message to Naaman telling him to bathe seven times in the Jordan and he would be healed. Naaman was offended that Elisha hadn't come to him in person and objected to bathing in the muddy Jordan. But his staff persuaded him to try it. He was healed, and in gratitude promised to worship only the Lord. Elisha refused payment but his servant Gehazi secretly followed Naaman and received a gift in Elisha's name. God revealed this to Elisha and Gehazi was punished by contracting leprosy.

Defeat of the Syrian attack (chap. 6-8:15)

Benhadad of Syria later attacked Israel but God revealed the Syrian's secret plans to Elisha. The Syrians eventually heard of this and so besieged Dothan where Elisha was. Elisha's servant was afraid until he had a

vision of a heavenly army protecting Elisha. God struck the Syrians with a temporary blindness and Elisha led them into Samaria. Their eyes were opened and Elisha arranged for them to be fed and sent them away. However, later the Syrian's besieged Samaria reducing the Israelites to starvation and cannibalism. The king blamed Elisha for promising deliverance and sent a man to try to kill him, and then went to Elisha himself, Elisha prophesied the famine would end the next day. Four lepers, desperate for food, went to the Syrian camp the next day and found it deserted. The army had panicked on hearing noises sounding like an army advancing during the night.

Benhadad, king of Syria, was ill and Elisha went to Damascus. Benhadad sent his servant Hazeal to ask Elisha if the sickness was fatal. Elisha told Hazeal it was not but that the king would die nevertheless. He also told Hazeal that he would become king. Hazeal returned and suffocated Benhadad.

Jehoram (or Joram) of Judah (853-841BC) (chap. 8:16-24)

Jehoram was a bad king, married to Athaliah, daughter of Ahab and Jezebel. During his reign Edom and Libnah successfully rebelled against Judah.

Ahaziah of Judah (841BC) and Jehu of Israel (841-814BC) (chap. 6:25-10:36)

The armies of Israel and Judah were defending Ramoth-gilead against Syria, and the king of Israel was lying wounded at Jezreel. Elisha sent a servant to anoint Jehu king of Israel at Ramoth-gilead. Jehu went to Jezreel where Ahaziah, king of Judah, was visiting Joram, the king of Israel, and assassinated them both. He ordered Jezebel's servants to throw her from her window. She died in the fall and before she could be buried, her body was eaten by dogs - fulfilling Elijah's prophecy. After this, Jehu killed all Ahab's family, many of the royal family of Judah and the prophets, priests and worshippers of Baal. He destroyed many objects associated with idolatry, but left the shrines at Bethel and Dan, which encouraged idolatry. During his reign, Syria conquered some of the land to the east of the Jordan - Gilead and the territory of the Gadites, Reubenites and Manassites.

Queen Athaliah of Judah (841-855BC) (chap. 11:1-20)

When her son, king Ahaziah, died Athaliah seized the throne, killing most of the royal family. But Joash, Ahaziah's son, was saved and hidden by his aunt, princess Johesheba. Six years later, Joash, under heavy armed guard, was publicly crowned by Jehoida the Priest. Athaliah was killed.

Joash (or Jehoash) of Judah (835-796BC) (chap. 11:21-12:21)

Joash, seven years old when he began to reign, was a good king under Jehoida's guidance. He ordered that money coming into the temple should be used to repair it, but for years the money got no further than the priests. So Joash arranged that all monies should go into a locked chest, under the control of the king's secretary and high priest. When Hazeal of Syria conquered Gath and turned to Jerusalem, Joash gave him many gifts of money from the temple and Hazeal went away. Eventually Joash was assassinated by his servants.

Jehoahaz of Israel (814-798BC) (chap. 13:1-9)

He was a bad king who suffered numerous defeats by Syria. They were delivered by some un-named "deliverer."

Jehoash (or Joash) of Israel (798-782BC) (chap. 13:10-25)

Elisha was dying and Jehoash of Israel visited him (chap.13:14 means Elisha was more valuable than the armed forces of Israel). He told Jehoash to shoot an arrow to symbolize victory over Syria, then to strike the ground with the arrows. Jehoash struck the ground three times. Elisha said he should have done it more times as it meant he would now only defeat Syria three times. Elisha died. Jehoash defeated Syria three times in the time of Hazeal's son, Benhadad.

2 KINGS: Invasion and exile (chapters 14-25)

(The Old Testament prophets who prophesied in each reign are indicated - Hosea ministered in Israel for much of the period as did Isaiah and Micah in Judah)

Amaziah of Judah 796-767BC (chap. 14:1-22)

Amaziah was a good king although some idolatry was tolerated in the land. He defeated 10,000 Edomites in the Valley of Salt and, proud of this victory, challenged Jehoash of Israel to battle. Amaziah was defeated at Bethshemesh and Jehoash broke down the walls of Jerusalem and plundered the temple treasures. However Amaziah outlived Jehoash by 15 years and was assassinated at Lachish.

Jereboam II of Israel 793-753BC (chap. 14:23-29)

Jereboam was an idolater but a powerful king. He dominated the area from Lebanon (Hamath) to the Dead Sea. This fulfilled the prophecy of JONAH who lived before or during Jereboam's reign. He also defeated Syria. But AMOS (2:6ff) and HOSEA condemned the corruption in Israel - extremes of wealth and poverty, the oppression of the weak and poor.

Azariah (or Uzziah) of Judah 791-740BC (chap. 15:1-7)

He was a good king who defeated the Philistines, the Arabs and reduced Ammon to a vassal (servant) state. Because of his pride he died of leprosy (see 2 Chronicles 26). The famous vision of Isaiah (Chapter 6) took place in the year Azariah (Uzziah) died.

Zechariah of Israel 753BC (chap. 15:8-12)

Zechariah was assassinated after six months by Shallum (Prophets: Amos & Hosea).

Shallum of Israel 753-752BC (chap. 15:13-16)

Shallum was assassinated after one month by Menahem (Prophets: Amos & Hosea)

Menahem of Israel 752-742BC (chap. 15:17-22)

Menahem was an idolater who became a vassal to Tiglath-Pileser III (Pul), king of Assyria. The latter was paid a great deal of money from taxes so that Menahem could preserve his throne. Menahem died and was succeeded by his son Pekahiah. (Prophets: Amos & Hosea)

Pekahiah of Israel 742-740BC (chap. 15:23-26)

Pekahiah was an evil king who, after two years, was killed in an army coup led by Pekah. (Prophet: Hosea)

Pekah of Israel (chap. 15:27-31)

Pekah reigned until 732BC but dated the beginning of his reign from the accession of Menahem i.e. 752 (see above). He was anti-Assyria and so Tiglath-pileser invaded Ijon, Abel-beth-maacah, Janoah, Jedesh, Hazor, Gilead, Galilee and Naphtali and deported all the people to Assyria. Pekah was assassinated by Hoshea. (Prophet: Hosea)

Jotham of Judah 750-732BC (chap. 15:32-38)

Jotham was a good king. He encountered opposition from Syria and Israel (Prophets: Isaiah & Micah)

Ahaz (Jehoahaz) of Judah 735-716BC (chap. 16)

Ahaz was an evil king mentioned in Isaiah 7 (which includes the promise of the virgin conceiving and bearing Immanuel - Isaiah 7:14). Rezin of Syria and Pekah of Israel attacked from the north, Edom and Philistia from the south. Ahaz appealed to Tiglath-pileser for help. Assyria took Damascus, killed Rezin and deported the people. Ahaz had to strip the silver and gold from the temple and palace to pay the Assyrians. He had a new

altar modelled on one he saw in Damascus and it replaced the bronze altar outside the temple. Use of this Assyrian altar for the worship of Yahweh (Jehovah) inevitably meant honouring Assyrian gods. Ahaz was claiming to be a god-king with priestly functions. (Prophet: Micah)

Hoshea, last king of Israel 732-723BC (chap. 17)

Hoshea was an idolater who became a vassal of Shalmaneser V, king of Assyria. He tried to rebel, attempting to win Egyptian help, so Shalmaneser imprisoned him, besieged Samaria for three years, then deported the people to Assyria. Verses 7-18 explain this was the result of Israel's long standing idolatry, heathen practices, breaking of the law and ignoring of the prophets. Shalmaneser repopulated the land with foreigners deported from other countries. Attacks by lions were attributed to their not worshipping the God of Israel, so an Israelite priest was sent back from exile as a missionary. Hence, alongside their idols, they worshipped Yahweh. A purer religion emerged amongst their descendants the Samaritans. (Prophet: Hosea)

Hezekiah of Judah 729-687BC (chap. 18-20)

Hezekiah was a good king who destroyed all the idols, including the bronze serpent Moses had made (which had subsequently used in idolatrous worship). He rebelled against Assyria and defeated the Philistines. Eventually Sennacherib, king of Assyria, invaded Judah and besieged Lachish. Hezekiah offered to pay tribute money. Sennacherib sent the Tartan (commander in chief of the army) the Rabсарis (a high military official) and the Rabshakeh (a high civil dignitary) to Jerusalem. They publicly mocked Hezekiah's trust in God, refusing to speak Aramaic which the people of Judah wouldn't understand. They stirred popular fears by speaking their threats in Hebrew. Hezekiah consulted Isaiah (see Isaiah 36-39) who foretold the Assyrian retreat (actually they hadn't enough troops available to take Jerusalem). Plague broke out in the Assyrian camp and Sennacherib returned home, being assassinated in 682BC.

Hezekiah fell ill of a fatal sickness, but through prayer was healed and promised 15 years more life. A sign of this was the miracle that the shadow of the sun went back ten steps on the steps of Ahaz (the steps were used as a sundial). There is no suggestion that the day was actually lengthened. The miracle was concerning the shadow.

The King of Babylon (then a small state near Assyria) visited Hezekiah and was shown the treasures of the temple etc. Isaiah prophesied that after Hezekiah's death the treasures would be plundered by Babylon and the people exiled. (Micah also prophesied now).

Manasseh of Judah 696-642BC (chap. 21:1-18)

Manasseh was a very evil king who caused worse degradation than the Canaanites - idolatry, human sacrifice, spiritism, astrology and violence. He set up idols in the temple. The prophets foretold judgement. (Prophet Isaiah)

Amon of Judah 642-640BC (chap. 21:19-26)

Amon, the evil son of Manasseh, was assassinated by his servants. (Prophet: Nahum)

Josiah of Judah 640-609BC (chap. 22-23:30)

Josiah was the best of Judah's kings. He sent Shaphan his secretary to Hilkiah the high priest to check the money in the Temple. Hilkiah found the book of the law (probably Deuteronomy). Reading it, Josiah realized how far short Judah had fallen of God's law. He consulted Huldah the prophetess who foretold judgement on Judah but mercy on Josiah. The law was read publicly and the covenant renewed with God. All the objects associated with pagan worship were destroyed and the pagan priests executed. Even former Israelite territory was included. The neglected feast of the passover was celebrated. But God's judgement was only delayed. Official reformation didn't change the hearts of the people. Josiah died in conflict with Pharaoh Necho from Egypt who was marching to join Assyria against the Babylonians who had conquered Nineveh, the Assyrian capital. (Prophets: Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk & Jeremiah)

Jehoahaz of Judah 609BC (chap. 23:31-35)

Jehoahaz was an evil king who, after three months, was deported to Egypt by Necho (Prophet: Jeremiah)

Jehoiakim of Judah 609-597BC (chap. 23:36-24:7)

Josiah's son, Eliakim, renamed Jehoiakim, was put on the throne by Necho. But Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon defeated Egypt at Carchemish in 605 BC. So Judah was vassal to Babylon for three years, then defected to Egypt. The Babylonians attacked and Jeremiah gave repeated warnings. Moab, Syria and the Ammonites also attacked Judah.

Jehoiachin of Judah 597BC (chap. 24:8-17)

Jehoiachin was an evil king. After three months Nebuchadnezzar took Jerusalem, imprisoned Jehoiachin, plundered the treasures and deported the leading people. (Prophet: Jeremiah)

Zedekiah 597-587BC (chap. 24:18-25:30)

Appointed by Nebuchadnezzar, Zedekiah later rebelled, so the Babylonians besieged Jerusalem for 18 months. Zedekiah attempted to escape to the south but was captured by the Babylonians, his sons executed, his eyes blinded and he was exiled to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar looted and destroyed Jerusalem. All but the poorest people were deported. Gedaliah was appointed governor but was murdered. Consequently the people in Judah escaped to Egypt to avoid reprisals from Babylon. (Thirty five years later, under a new king of Babylon, Jehoiachin was released and treated kindly)

(Prophets: Jeremiah in Judah - eventually taken to Egypt, also Daniel and Ezekiel in Babylon. Obadiah followed Jeremiah in Judah.)

(Notice how God sent the famous Old Testament Prophets, as a last resort, during Israel and Judah's morally and politically declining years, to try to prevent disaster. But they did not listen or repent, so complete destruction and exile overtook them.)

1 CHRONICLES (Read with the notes on 2 Samuel)

This book repeats much of the history of 2 Samuel and Kings. It was written (possibly about 400BC) for the people who returned from exile under Ezra and Nehemiah. They needed to know about true worship and true kingship. So the writer selects his material accordingly, e.g. he concentrates on the kings of David's line only. He tends to 'modernize' the history, i.e. put it into terms his readers could understand and names are often spelt differently from earlier books.

1. FAMILY TREE – ADAM TO THE EXILE AND AFTER (chap. 1-9).

This includes a list of those who returned from exile to live in Jerusalem (chap. 9: 1-34).

2. THE REIGN OF DAVID (chap. 10-29).

The death of Saul (chap. 10)

See 1 Sam. 31.

David made king (chap. 11-12)

See 2 Sam. 5:1-3; 6-10, 23:8-39, 6:1-11. (NB.1 Chron. 11:41-47 and Chap. 12 have no parallel in 2 Sam. , but simply add details - particularly names of people involved with David).

The first attempt to bring the ark to Jerusalem (chap. 13)

See 2 Sam. 6: 1-11. Because he is writing a *religious* history, the Chronicler puts this event first, although it happened later in David's reign.

Victory over the Philistines (chap. 14)

See 2 Sam. 5:11-25.

The ark brought to Jerusalem (chap. 15:1-16:3).

Chap. 15:1-24 has no parallel in Samuel. David pitched a tent for the ark and made it clear that no-one but the Levites may carry the ark. David also commanded the chiefs of the Levites to appoint their brethren as the singers who should also play loudly on musical instruments, on harps and lyres and cymbals, to raise sounds of joy." (v.16) (15:25-16:3 see 2 Sam. 6: 12-20).

Thanksgiving to God (chap. 16:12-20)

Some Levites were to invoke, thank and praise the Lord, others played instruments. Asaph was in charge of the choir. Typical psalms are included: Psalm 105:1-15 encourages praise to God for his protection of them in the wilderness and his providing the land according to his covenant. Psalm 96: 1-13 is inspiring worship calling on creation to worship the creator in awe. Psalm 106:1, 47, 48. David arranged for continual daily worship and sacrifices to take place at Jerusalem and at Gibeon.

David is not allowed to build the temple (chap 17).

See 2 Sam. 7:1-29.

David's wars (chap. 18 - 20).

See 2 Sam. 8: 1-18; 2 Sam. 10:1-19; 2 Sam. 11:1; 12: 26-31. 2 Sam. 21:18-22.

The census and plague (chap. 21)

See 2 Sam. 24:1-25. Here Satan is said to have incited David to take the census. In Samuel it is God, i.e. Satan

can only do what God allows. This is typical of the Old Testament practice of ascribing evil to God which is 'shorthand' for saying God allowed Satan to do it. Ornan (v.18) is 'Araunah' in Samuel. The confusion may be because it is a foreign name. The threshing floor was an open space on which the sheaves were spread. Oxen pulled sleds to loosen grain which was then winnowed by being tossed into the wind.

Preparations for building the temple (chap. 22)

Probably David was co-regent with Solomon and to help his inexperienced son, he selected the site, amassed materials and worked out the plans. But God would not allow David to build because he had shed so much blood in his battles.

The duties of the Levites (chap. 23-26)

The Levites were to look after the sanctuary and services. Initially, they began to serve at the age of 30, but after the temple was completed, the age was 20. They were also involved as magistrates, janitors, musicians and choristers. There were 24 groups of priests who each served for two weeks a year.

Army commanders, tribal leaders, civil service and government (chap. 27)

Solomon takes over and the plans for the temple are explained (chap. 28-29)

David called a public assembly for Solomon's official coronation. He explained how God had called Solomon to build the temple. He said to Solomon "Know the God of your father, and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind; for the Lord searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought. If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will cast you off for ever." (28:9). "Be strong and of good courage, and do it. Fear not, be not dismayed for the Lord God, even my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you until all the work for the service of the house of the Lord is finished." (28:20).

David made a very generous donation for the building and invited the people to do the same, which they did. "Then the people rejoiced because these had given willingly, for with a whole heart they had offered freely to the Lord." David responded with a beautiful prayer:

"Praise be to you, LORD, the God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Yours, LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendour, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name."

This prayer, which continues to verse 19, is one of the best in the Old Testament.

2 CHRONICLES chapters 1-16

(Read this with 1 Kings).

Solomon establishes himself as king (chaps. 1-9)

See 1 Kings 3: 4-15; 10:26-29.

Solomon buys temple building materials from Hiram (chap. 2)

See 1 Kings 5:2-11, 15, 16. (Hiram and Hurambi are other forms of Hiram's name).

The building of the temple (chap. 3-7)

See 1 Kings 6:1-28; 7:15-21, 23-26, 38-51. The veil of blue, purple and crimson worked with cherubim (2 Chron.3: 14) is not mentioned in 1 Kings, It screened off the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place. The measurements of the bronze altar (4:1) are not in Kings either. It was about 35 feet (11 metres) square and 17 feet (5.5 metres) high.

See also 1 Kings 8:1-50. The Levitical singers "arrayed in fine linen with cymbals, harps and lyres with a hundred and twenty priests who were trumpeters; and it was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord" (5:12-13).

At the end of his dedication prayer, Solomon quoted (6:41-42) from Psalm 132:8-10. After his prayer fire (lightning) came down from heaven and consumed the sacrifices. This awe-inspiring happening led the people to bow to the ground in worship. .

See also 1 Kings 8:62-66; 9:1-9. God answered Solomon's prayer saying he will accept the temple and continues – "if my people who are called, by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (7:14).

Solomon's building work and trade (chap. 8)

See 1 Kings 9:10-28.

Visit of the Queen of Sheba (chap. 9:1-12)

See 1 Kings 10:1-13.

Solomon's fame (chap. 9:13-31)

See 1 Kings 10:14-28; 11:42-48.

3. THE KINGS OF JUDAH (chap. 10-36)

The Chronicler does not recognize the kings of Israel but only David's descendants in Judah. He frequently refers to Judah as Israel. He does however, still include the 10 tribes as part of the Israelite nation, as they contain some people loyal to God and David.

Rehoboam and the division of the land (chap. 10-12).

See 1 Kings 12:1-19. However a parallel to 1 Kings 12:20 referring to Rehoboam being made king of Israel is omitted.

See also 1 Kings 12:22-24. NB. In 11:3, the Chronicler refers to "all Israel in Judah and Benjamin" - showing the different use of the name Israel from Kings, i.e. in Chronicles 'Israel' means the covenant people;

in Kings, Rehoboam fortified many of his towns in Judah. Many Levites and worshippers of Yahweh came to Judah as refugees from Jereboam's idolatry. Jereboam broke religious ties with Jerusalem.

See also 1 Kings 14:25-31.

Abijah and war with Israel

See 1 Kings 15:1-2, 7. Chapter 13:3-20 has no parallel in Kings. Abijah stood on Mt. Zemaraim facing Jereboam who had twice as many men as he did. He shouted to them that the Lord had made David's family the royal line. Jereboam, he said, had therefore rebelled against God and had added idolatry to his sins. He appealed to Jereboam's men not to fight against the Lord. Meanwhile, Jereboam had sent an ambush behind the lines of Jurlah. But Judah cried to the Lord who gave them a decisive victory.

Asa (chap. 14-16).

See 1 Kings 15:8-12, 17-22.

Chap 14:9-15:15 has no parallel in Kings.

Zerah the Ethiopian (probably an Egyptian or Arabian chieftain from modern Sudan) invaded Judah with a huge force. Asa cried to the Lord and the Lord gave him victory. On his return, Asa was met by Azariah the prophet, who assured him that the Lord was there if Asa sought him but would forsake him if Asa disobeyed. Asa then proceeded to remove idolatry and gathered the people, including the refugees from the northern kingdom, for a great sacrifice to the Lord. They swore an oath to the Lord. See also 1 Kings 15:13-22.

Chap. 16:7-10 has no parallel in Kings. Later Hanani the prophet condemned Asa for seeking help from Syria against Israel. Asa imprisoned Hanani and maltreated others of the people.

2 CHRONICLES chapters 17-36 (Read with 1 & 2 Kings)

THE KINGS OF JUDAH (Contd.)

Jehoshaphat (chap.17-20)

See 1 Kings 15:24 and 22:1-50. "His heart was courageous in the ways of the Lord" (17:6). 17:7-19 has no parallel in Kings. Jehoshaphat sent his princes to teach in Judah from the book of the Law. He was so much respected by surrounding nations that he grew rich from tribute given by the Philistines and Arabs. He was surrounded by mighty warriors.

19:1-11 has no parallel in Kings. Jehu, the son of Hanani the prophet, pronounced God's impending judgment on the lack of justice in Judah. So Jehoshaphat appointed judges throughout the land, telling them to maintain justice in the fear of God. Certain priests and Levites were appointed in Jerusalem to decide disputed cases as a court of appeal.

20:1-3- has no parallel in Kings. Moabites, Ammonites and Meunites (Arabs from Edom) came against Judah to Engedi. Jehoshaphat proclaimed a national fast. He prayed a prayer affirming his faith in the Lord as deliverer in the past and asking God to judge the enemy "for we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you" (20:12). Then Jehaziel, the prophet, prophesied. "He said: "...Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army for the battle is not yours, but God's. You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will give you" (20:15-17). The people's response was to offer worship and praise. Then Jehoshaphat "appointed men to sing to the LORD and to praise him for the splendour of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying: 'Give thanks to the LORD, for his love endures forever.' As they began to sing and praise, the LORD set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated" (20:21-22) The enemy fought amongst themselves and destroyed each other. Judah was able to collect a very great amount of spoil, and returned to Jerusalem very joyfully.

Jehoram (chap. 21)

See 2 Kings 8:16-24. Jehoram, Jehoshaphat's son, killed many of his brothers when he came to the throne. 21:11-17 has no parallel in Kings. He encouraged idolatry and Elijah wrote to him saying God would judge him and a plague would break out. Then the Philistines with some Arabs plundered Jehoram's palace and carried off his wives and all but one of his sons. Later Elijah's prophecy was fulfilled.

Ahaziah (chap. 22:1-9)

See 2 Kings 8:25-29.

Athaliah (chap. 22:10-23:21)

See 2 Kings 11.

Joash (chap. 24)

See 2 Kings 11:21-12:21. There is no parallel to 24:15-22 in Kings. After Jehoida the priest had died, Joash was influenced by his princes and encouraged idolatry. Zechariah the prophet (son of Jehoida) prophesied judgment, but Joash had him stoned to death. Later that year the Syrians attacked and destroyed the princes with a very small force. So Joash was judged.

Amaziah (chap. 25)

See 2 Kings, 14. There is no parallel to 25:5-10, 13-16 in Kings. Amaziah assembled a large army from Israel. But a prophet told him to dismiss them and trust God for the victory. He did this, but cruelly executed many captured Edomites. Meanwhile the dismissed army from Israel expressed their frustration by attacking many cities of Judah. Amaziah brought idols back from Edom and incurred God's anger. He would not listen to the prophets however.

Uzziah (chap. 26)

See 2 Kings 15:1-7. There is no parallel to 26:5-20 in Kings. Uzziah defeated the Philistines at Gath, Jabneh and Ashdod, and also the Arabs and Meunites. The Ammonites paid him tribute. He built towers at Jerusalem, encouraged agriculture and trained a well-equipped army. "But when he grew strong he grew proud, to his destruction" (26:16). He offered incense in the temple which only priest should do. The priests rebuked him, making him angry, and he contracted leprosy, which for the rest of his life made him an outcast.

Jotham (chap. 27)

See 2 Kings 15:32-38. "So Jotham became mighty because he ordered his ways before the Lord his God" (27:6)

Ahaz (chap. 28).

See 2 Kings 16, Isaiah 7. There is no parallel to 28:8-15 in Kings. Judah was defeated by Israel and Israel took many of the people to make them slaves. But God sent Oded the prophet to warn them against this. Amazingly, Israel listened, cared for their captives and released them.

Hezekiah (chap. 29-32)

See 2 Kings 28-20. 29:3-31:21 has no parallel in Kings. Hezekiah's first concern was to cleanse the temple. He told the people that its neglect and disuse had brought God's judgment but they should now make a new covenant with God. So the building and utensils were cleaned. Then Hezekiah arranged for great sacrifices - burnt offerings and sin offerings - to be offered. The burnt offerings were accompanied by instrumental music and singing. Then thank offerings were presented. "And Hezekiah and all the people rejoiced because of what God had done for the people; for the thing came about suddenly" (29:36). Hezekiah then invited all Judah and the few remaining Israelites who had not gone into exile to come and celebrate the Passover. He promised God would bring back the exiles if the people joined in the feast. But most Israelites scorned the invitation. So the passover was celebrated "and the Levites and the priests praised the Lord day by day, singing with all their might to the Lord" (30:21). After this Hezekiah arranged for the old laws governing worship to be re-

introduced. The practice of tithing to support the priests was resumed. The response was overwhelming. It was after this that Sennacherib invaded Judah.

Manasseh (chap. 33:1-20)

See 2 Kings 21: 1-18. There is no parallel to 33:11-17 in Kings. Manasseh was captured by the Assyrians and taken to Babylon. (The Assyrians put hooks or rings through the noses of any kings they conquered - 33-11). He repented of his evil life and was restored to Jerusalem. There he removed idolatry and restored the worship of God.

Amon (chap. 33:21-25)

See 2 Kings 21:19-26.

Josiah (chap. 34-35)

See 2 Kings 22-23.

Jehoahaz (chap. 36:1-4)

See 2 Kings 23: 31-35).

Jehoiakim (chap. 36:5-8)

See 2 Kings 23:36-24:7.

Jehoiachin (chap. 36:9-10)

See 2 Kings 24:8-16. (Verse 9 should read “eighteen years old” and verse 10 “his *uncle* Zedekiah).,,

Zedekiah and the fall of Jerusalem (chap 36:11-21)

See 2 Kings 24:18-25:30. Verses 22-23 were retained at the end of 2 Chronicles when the book of Ezra was detached from it. They are repeated in Ezra. 1:1-3.

EZRA

Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther describe the last century of Jewish history in the Old Testament (approx. 538 - 433BC). Ezra lived during the ministries of the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. Also, Daniel was still alive in the reign of Cyrus.

The Jews return from exile (chap. 1-2) 538/7BC

Cyrus (559-530BC), the Persian, had conquered Babylon and began to repatriate the peoples the Babylonians had exiled, (Isaiah prophesied this some 150 years earlier, see Isaiah 44:26-28; 45:1-13). Cyrus made a written proclamation that the Jews were free to rebuild the temple at Jerusalem. The people gave gifts of silver and gold to the Jews and Cyrus restored to them the temple vessels which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away. So, in 538/7BC, Zerubbabel led the first party of Jews back to Jerusalem.

The rebuilding of the Temple and the opposition (chap 3-4)

The people of Israel gathered in Jerusalem and Jeshua the High Priest with Zerubbabel built the altar of burnt offering. Burnt offerings were made regularly, and the feast of tabernacles was kept. Cedarwood from Lebanon was used to build the temple in the second year of their return. The Levites were appointed to oversee the work. There was great joy, praise, shouting and weeping when the foundations were laid. However, the foreigners with whom the Assyrians had repopulated the land, who mixed worship of Yahweh with idolatry, offered to help with the rebuilding. The Jews refused, so they began to discourage the builders, making them afraid and bribing officials to carry unfavourable reports to Cyrus. This continued through the reigns of Cambyses 530-522BC, Darius I 522-486 until 521BC, i.e. for fifteen years the rebuilding stopped. (Chap. 4:6-23 looks forward to the reign of Xerxes I (Ahasuerus) 486-465BC and Artaxerxes I 464-423BC when the opposition wrote to the Persian king saying the Jews would rebel when the walls of Jerusalem were completed. Artaxerxes responded by forbidding the Jews to continue rebuilding the walls of the city.

The Temple completed and the Passover celebrated (chap 5-6)

In 521BC Haggai and Zechariah prophesied to encourage the people to resume building the temple. Then the Persian governor of the "Beyond the River (Euphrates) Province" demanded to know on what authority they were doing so. He wrote to Darius to check the answer the Jews gave. Darius checked the decree Cyrus had made and then instructed the governor to give every assistance to the Jews in rebuilding the temple, threatening death to any who disobeyed. Four years later (516-515BC) the temple was completed and dedicated, the priests and Levites organised and the passover celebrated with great rejoicing.

EZRA RETURNS TO JERUSALEM (chap. 7-10)

The Journey (chap. 7-8)

Sixty year later (485BC), during which the time Esther had prevented the massacre of the Jews, including Ezra and Nehemiah, Ezra returned to Jerusalem, He was a direct descendant of the high priests and a scholar. He took four months to make the 900 mile journey. Artaxerxes had decreed that any priests and Levites could, if they wished, return to Jerusalem taking gifts of silver and gold to offer sacrifices. He ordered the treasurers in the Beyond the River Province to assist Ezra financially and not to impose any taxes on the priests and Levites. Ezra was authorized to appoint judges and magistrates and to beautify the temple (chap.7:27-9:15 are Ezra's own memoirs). So Ezra, set out with 1700 priests, people and (reluctant) Levites taking gifts worth over a million pounds. Ezra had told Artaxerxes that God would care for them so he was ashamed to ask for an escort. After a day of fasting and prayer, the journey went safely. ('Satraps' were very powerful governors 8:36).

The problem of mixed marriages with the heathen (chap. 9-10)

Many of the priests, Levites and people had married heathen partners. This was forbidden in Deuteronomy 7:1-5 because it led to idolatry. In spite of the fact that idolatry had led to the exile, the people still hadn't learnt their lesson. When he heard of this, Ezra was deeply upset and after a day of fasting, poured out his

feelings in a great prayer of confession for the sins of the people. Many of the people joined him.

The people suggested that all heathen wives and children be put away. Ezra led the people in making a covenant with God to do this. He sent a proclamation to all the people to gather at Jerusalem or to have their property confiscated and be excluded from the people of God. Within three days, in the heavy December rains, the people gathered and agreed to divorce their pagan partners. The list of names of 113 men who had married pagan wives was published. It included 17 priests, 10 Levites and 86 others. Some of them had divorced Jewish wives to marry pagans (see Malachi 2 10-16).

Ezra's action seems harsh, but the whole survival of the Jews depended on the removal of idolatry - the sin which had led to exile. Doubtless proper provision was made for the pagan wives and children. The unhappiness of 113 homes was seen to be a small price to pay for this. For out of the Jewish nation was to come the messiah.

NEHEMIAH

Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem (chap. 1-3)

The book begins 12 years after Ezra returned to Jerusalem, and after Esther had saved the exiled Jews from massacre. In December 446BC Nehemiah's brother, Hanani brought news of the sad state of Jerusalem which lay in ruins. Nehemiah was Artaxerxes' cup bearer and had to taste the king's wine to see it wasn't poisoned. At this time the Persian court was at the winter capital of Susa.

Nehemiah was deeply upset at the news and for four months he grieved and prayed, asking God for mercy. Artaxerxes eventually noticed how sad Nehemiah was and asked the reason. He then granted Nehemiah the freedom to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. This contrasted with the fact that Artaxerxes had earlier stopped the rebuilding of the city (Ezra 4:7-23). Hence Nehemiah had risked his life to show sadness in the king's presence and to ask to rebuild Jerusalem.

So he arrived at Jerusalem as governor. Sanballat, governor of Samaria, and Tobiah, probably governor of Trans-jordan, were opposed to any rebuilding so Nehemiah did a secret survey of the city after dark. He then publicly announced his plan, which angered the opposition. However, many of the people volunteered to help, including the women. They built sections near their own homes which gave them a personal interest. Ezra and his party are not mentioned.

The opposition to the rebuilding (chap. 4-7)

At first the opposition ridiculed the building work until the lower half of the wall was completed. Then they decided to terrorise the Jews. So Nehemiah and the people prayed and set guards. From then on, half the people built and half stood guard. Some of the labourers worked with one hand and held a sword with the other. It was arranged that a trumpet blast would rally the people to fight off the opposition.

Nehemiah had been buying freedom for Jewish slaves and loaning money and food to the poor. But then he heard that some rich Jews had been charging interest on their fellow countrymen (which was forbidden by the law - Exodus 22-25) and had even sold some into slavery. Nehemiah ordered this practice to cease and interest to be repaid. In fact, Nehemiah paid for his own keep as governor, unlike his predecessor.

So the wall was almost finished and Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem the Arab, tried to trick Nehemiah into meeting them outside Jerusalem where they could kill him. Nehemiah refused to leave the work. Then the opposition tried blackmail - saying Nehemiah wished to be king and to rebel against Persia. After this, Shemaiah, a prophet, asked Nehemiah to hide in the temple because the enemies were coming to kill him. Nehemiah refused to be frightened into such a degrading action. He realised that Shemaiah had been hired by Sanballat and Tobiah to discredit him. In under two months the walls were finished, which even their enemies recognized as a miracle. This was in spite of the fact that many Jewish nobles were in league with Tobiah and tried to make Nehemiah believe he was sincere.

The reading of the law and renewing of the covenant (chap. 8-12:26)

Later the people asked Ezra to read the law to them as they gathered in Jerusalem. He did so and the Levites explained it to them as they remained in their places. On hearing God's standards, the people are very upset at their failure. But the Levites told them not to grieve as it was a holy day, "for the joy of the Lord is your strength" (8: 10). They also discovered the instructions about the feast of the tabernacles and celebrated it. It had not been celebrated with such joy since Joshua's day.

Later in the month, they gathered for a Day of National Repentance. For a quarter of the day the law was read and for another quarter confession was made. Ezra led in a prayer which traced the history of Israel, its rebellion and God's mercy, and asked his forgiveness.

Then the covenant was renewed. Nehemiah with the leaders, priests and Levites signed it on behalf of the

people. It was ratified with a curse on those who broke it and an oath of loyalty to God. In particular, the people promised to keep the law concerning marriage, the sabbath, taxes, offerings and tithes.

The dedication of the walls (chap. 12:27-47)

For the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem, a celebration “with gladness, with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps and lyres” (12:27) was arranged. Two companies, each led by a choir, processed in opposite directions along the top of the wall and met at the temple for thanksgiving and sacrifices. And they “rejoiced for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off” (12:43).

Nehemiah deals with abuses of the law (chap.13)

In 433BC Nehemiah visited Artaxerxes. On his return he found, that Eliashib, the high priest, had given Tobiah rooms adjoining the Temple, although he was not an Israelite. Nehemiah angrily threw Tobiah’s furniture out and had the rooms cleansed. He also discovered that the tithes had not been paid to the Levites and singers, the Sabbath law had been broken, and that some Israelites had married foreign wives. He took strong measures against these abuses - locking the city gates on the Sabbath and making offenders take an oath against marrying foreigners.

ESTHER

This story fits between the rebuilding of the temple at Jerusalem and the return of Ezra.

Queen Vashti is deposed (chap. 1)

King Ahasuerus (Xerxes) of Persia ruled a huge empire which stretched from the Indus to Northern Sudan. His winter capital (too hot in summer) was at Susa - 150 miles east of Babylon. He was a cruel, unstable and sensual man. In 483 BC, after a six month exhibition of his wealth and power, he gave a great banquet which lasted for seven days. On the last day Ahasuerus, somewhat drunk, ordered his queen Vashti to appear before him to show off her beauty. She refused, and on the advice of the astrologers that it could lead to other women rebelling, the king ordered her to be deposed.

Esther becomes queen and Mordecai saves the king's life (chap. 2).

It was four years later that Ahasuerus was able to choose his new queen. During that time he had invaded Greece, taking Athens, but was defeated at the sea battle of Salamis. He ordered that many beautiful young girls be brought to the harem in Susa and given a year's beauty treatment before being presented to him. Among these was Esther, cousin of Mordecai the Jew. Her parents had died and he had brought her up. Esther was presented to the king and he, not knowing she was Jewish, made her his queen in December/January 479BC. Later, Mordecai discovered a plot by two of the king's servants who guarded the royal bedroom, to assassinate Ahasuerus. Mordecai told Esther who informed the king. The offenders were crucified and Mordecai's deed recorded.

Haman is promoted and plans to destroy the Jews (chap. 3)

Ahasuerus promoted Haman to a leading position and ordered that everyone should bow before him. Mordecai refused to bow, as it meant going beyond courtesy into idolatry. Haman was furious and decided to exterminate all the Jews. He had to choose a 'lucky' day by casting 'pur' or lots. After eleven months the day came and Haman told the king that the Jews were rebellious. He advised that they be destroyed and offered the king £3 million from Jewish possessions. The king agreed and sent out letters ordering the annihilation of the Jews.

Esther seeks to save the Jews (chap. 4-5)

Esther heard of all this and decided to take the dangerous step of approaching the king about it. She had not been summoned by the king for a month and anyone approaching the king without being summoned would be executed, unless the king held out his golden sceptre to the offender. Ahasuerus did receive Esther and offered to meet any request of hers. She asked him with Haman to come to dinner. After dinner she asked them both to come to dinner the following day. Haman, very flattered, went home and built a gallows on which to hang Mordecai.

Mordecai receives a belated reward (chap. 6)

But Ahasuerus had a sleepless night. So he ordered that the court diary be read to him. The account of how Mordecai had saved the king's life was read and it was revealed that no reward had been given for this action. At this point Haman arrived and the king asked his advice about rewarding a favourite. Thinking the king was referring to him, Haman advised that royal robes and a royal horse be the reward. The king agreed and told Haman to arrange this for Mordecai. Haman was terribly upset as he had actually come to ask the king for permission to execute Mordecai.

Haman's plot discovered (chap. 7)

After Esther's second dinner party with the King and Haman, she made her request that the Jews be saved from Haman's evil plot. The king left angrily and Haman pleaded with Esther, throwing himself at her feet as she reclined on a couch. At this moment the king returned and assumed Haman was attempting to assault her. He was taken out and hanged on his own gallows.

Mordecai promoted, the Jews take vengeance, the feast of Purim (chap. 8-10)

Mordecai was made the grand vizier and put over Haman's house. Esther pleaded with the king to reverse the edict concerning the destruction of the Jews. The problem was that such an edict could not be cancelled. So the king issued a second decree that the Jews could defend themselves against any attack without fear of punishment. So the Jews destroyed many of their enemies - 500 in Susa plus the ten sons of Haman. Esther requested that the bodies of Haman's sons be publicly hung. From that time onwards, the Feast of Purim was held annually to celebrate the great deliverance

JOB

This book is part of the 'Wisdom' writings in the Old Testament (with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes). These writings combine stories, popular sayings and rules for living. They are to do with every-day life, good and bad conduct. Some of the material is common sense based on experience. Much of it is poetry, the main characteristic of which is rhythm rather than rhymes or word play.

No-one knows who wrote Job. The book describes Job as living either in a very early period (i.e. within the time of the book of Genesis) or in a very remote area. He is described as an influential sheik, rich in animals rather than cash. He spent part of his year in the city, for the rest he was on the move with his cattle.

The book tackles the problem of undeserved suffering. It is limited in the sense that he and his friends had no assurance of life after death and, of course, no knowledge of the cross of Christ. But it has helped many sufferers and been hailed as one of the masterpieces of world literature.

Job a God-fearing man (chap. 1:1-5)

Job lived in the land of Uz, mentioned in Genesis 10:23; 22:21; 36:28. It was probably east of Jordan and north of Edom. So he was vulnerable to attacks from the Chaldeans and Sabeans. Job was "blameless and upright, one who feared God, and turned away from evil" (1:1). Every morning he offered burnt offerings in case his seven sons and three daughters had sinned against God.

Satan allowed to ruin Job (chap. 1:6 - 2:13)

Chap. 1:6-12 describes Satan as accusing Job of serving God only for personal gain. God gave Satan permission to test Job - but not to afflict him personally. The story tells how in one day, through foreign raiders and natural disaster, Job lost all his possessions, servants and family. Job's reaction is "the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21). So Satan accused Job to God, saying he would curse God if he suffered personally. God therefore permitted Satan to afflict Job with running sores. His wife advised him to curse God and die. Job became an outcast, but three friends (wise men from Arab and Edomite territory) remained loyal. However, they sat in silence appalled at the disaster.

The first dialogue between Job and his friends (chap. 3-14)

Eventually Job (chap. 3) cursed the day of his birth and expressed a longing for death. (Leviathan - 3:8 - may have been a monster supposedly imprisoned by God at creation. In chapter 4:1 it is a crocodile). Eliphaz (chap. 4-5) replied that since Job had often helped other sufferers he must now practise what he preached. God punishes the guilty not the innocent. Besides, no-one is completely innocent. Suffering is inevitable so Job should seek God, accept his punishment and wait for forgiveness. Eliphaz didn't realise that Job was an innocent sufferer.

Job (chaps. 6-7) replied that it is sickening to tell a desperate man to be patient. He simply wants to die and they are unsympathetic. "He who withholds kindness from a friend forsakes the fear of the Almighty" (6:14). He is innocent. Yet he is suffering days of pain and nights without sleep. He then turned to God and poured out his fears and his longing to die. Why is God punishing him? If he is guilty, why does God not forgive? (7:5 Job's wounds bred maggots).

Bildad (chap. 8) rebuked Job at this point. God is just and fair. He only punishes the wicked but rewards the righteous. The fathers taught this and who are we to disagree, "for we are but of yesterday, and know nothing, for our days on earth are a shadow" (8:9).

Job (chap. 9-10) agreed that God is just but could not square that with his own innocent suffering. It seems "he destroys both the blameless and the wicked." (9:22). Disaster comes to both and the creator becomes the destroyer. Will he not allow some relief before death?

Zophar (chap. 11) reacted harshly to Job's words. He rebuked him for claiming innocence "Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves" (11:16). Repentance will lead to restoration.

Job (chap. 12-14) replied sarcastically, "No doubt you are the people and wisdom will die with you" (12:2). God is all-wise and all-powerful. If he chooses to change the usual pattern of justice what can mere men do about it? Job knows his friends are wrong and that he will be vindicated by appealing to God. But "Man that is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble" (14:1). When he dies he will not be raised from sleep. Job asked God to hide him in Sheol (the land of the dead) until his anger is over.

The second dialogue between Job and his friends (chap. 15-21)

Eliphaz (chap. 15) now spoke more vehemently, not making any allowance for Job's stress or thinking he could be innocent. Job is called a self-opinionated old wind bag! He is simply seeking to justify himself by criticizing God. That proves his guilt. It is quite wrong of Job to say the wicked get away with their behaviour - they will end in ruin.

Job (chap. 16-17) responded "... miserable comforters are you all" (16:2). He could do what they are doing but it does no good. He feels "shrivelled up" "torn," broken and scorned.

Bildad (chap. 18) replied, resentful of Job's anger. The end of the wicked man is dreadful. This was intended to put Job in his place.

"How long will you torment me and break me in pieces with words?" asked Job (19:2). He is turned in on himself, desperate and alone. Even his family and his friends loathe him. But even at this point he affirms his faith, "I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another" (Job 19:25-27).

Feeling insulted, Zophar (chap. 20) continued where Bildad left off about the fate of the wicked. But Job (chap. 21) pointed out that experience proved differently - the wicked often seemed to succeed and enjoy a good long life even though they reject God. The friends had said that judgment fell on the wicked man's children, but this, says Job, lets the wicked off scot-free. No, the so called comfort of his friends is a pack of lies.

The third dialogue between Job and his friends (chap. 22-31)

Eliphaz (chap. 22), speaking for the last time, accused Job of oppressing the weak and refusing to help the needy. Job could not hide this from God but needed to repent.

Job (chap.23-24) responded by wishing he knew where to find God. His ways are beyond understanding. The oppressors go free. The prayers of the oppressed are ignored.

To this, Bildad (chap. 25), in his last speech, repeated that no man is perfect - any more than creation is.

His friends having exhausted their arguments, Job replied that God's power shown in creation, is beyond comprehension (chap. 26). He refused to agree with his friend's criticisms (chap. 27:1-6. Verses 7-23 are strange if said by Job. They could be misplaced here and actually be one of his friend's speeches - e.g. Zophar's missing third speech). Man can mine for hidden riches but who can find wisdom enough to understand the ways of God? Only God understands it and wisdom, comes from reverencing him (chap. 28). "Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding" (chap. 28:28).

Job remembered the good old days of God's favour - happiness at home, success in business, many friends, good reputation (chap 29). But now he is despised, mocked and outcast. Furthermore, he is continually racked with pain (chap.30). And yet he has avoided immorality - even in thought (chap.31:1, 9-12) he has

treated his employees fairly (chap.31:13-15), he has relieved the needs of the poor (chap.31:16-23). He has never made money his god or fallen into idolatry (chap.31:24-27); he has entertained strangers (chap.31:32); he has no secret sins (chap.31:33). Nor has he been afraid of being unpopular through doing right (chap.31:34). Job was prepared to swear this was true (chap.31:35 -40).

Elihu condemns Job (chap. 32-37)

Elihu - an angry young man - could contain his indignation no longer when he realised Job's friends had no more to say (chap. 32). Job has justified himself saying he is the innocent victim of God, and God will not reply to the charge. Elihu points out that God warns men and brings suffering to them - not to destroy them, but to save them (chap.33). God is supreme, just and impartial but Job has added resentment and rebellion to his sins (chap. 34). God is not touched by good and bad conduct (this is incorrect, of course) and he does not answer those who are only praying for their own benefit (chap.35). God is a teacher who speaks to men through suffering, so Job should not be longing for death but listening to what God has to say (chap. 36). God, as creator, controls thunder, lightning, rain, snow and clouds. Against God's majesty and holiness, man is nothing. He should fear God. God pays no attention to arrogant men like Job (chap. 37).

God answers Job (chap. 38-42)

Contrary to Elihu's opinions, God does now answer Job. God is holy and almighty but he is nearby also. He asks Job questions which make him lower his opinion of himself and gain a greater appreciation of God. Where was Job when God made the earth and sea, day and night, snow, hail, rain and frost, the constellations, lightning and clouds (chap. 38)? What does Job know about wild animals - the lion, raven, goat, wild ass, ox, ostrich, horse, hawk and eagle? Did he create them? Can he control them and feed them (chap. 39)? Is Job equal with God, that he questions God's justice? Behemoth (the hippopotamus) and Leviathan (the crocodile) are very strong and wild. Man cannot tame them. How foolish, therefore, to imagine man is equal with God (40-41).

Job responded that he has been out of his depth. In spite of all he does not understand, now he sees God, he is satisfied. To see such a great God is to trust him. All resentment drains away.

“Then Job replied to the LORD: “I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?’ Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. “You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.’ My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (chap.42:1-6).

The Lord rebuked Job's friends and told them to offer sacrifices. He would answer Job's prayer if he prayed for mercy for them. Then God restored to Job twice as much as he had originally lost. “After Job had prayed for his friends, the LORD restored his fortunes and gave him twice as much as he had before (chap.42:10). He lived to a great age.

PSALMS 1-25

There are five books of psalms (1-41, 42-72; 73-89. 90-106 and 107-150) each ending with a doxology (a formal declaration of praise to God). Psalm 150 is a doxology to the whole collection. The headings are later than the Psalms but very ancient. 73 Psalms bear David's name - some dedicated to him, some collected by him, some written by him. There are different types of psalms - hymns of praise, communal laments at a time of disaster, royal psalms related to some event in the king's life; individual laments and individual thanksgivings. (The psalms marked with * are ascribed to David). (These notes could be used as an index to the Book of Psalms - to find a psalm appropriate to particular circumstances).

BOOK ONE

Psalm 1: The blessing resulting from obeying God's word

The happy man rejects the advice and example of sinners. He delights in meditating on Scripture which constantly refreshes him. The wicked will be blown away like chaff, at the Judgment.

Psalm 2: The sovereign Lord of heaven will judge rebellious peoples

The nations of the world conspire against the Lord and his chosen (anointed) man. This is primarily the king of the time and ultimately Christ, (it is clear from the words of this Psalm and others that a second deeper meaning referring to Christ is included. The words have never been completely fulfilled in the kings of Israel.

The New Testament applies these to Christ). The Lord scorns their rebellion and promises the whole earth to his Son who will judge sinners.

Psalm 3: A prayer in time of danger*

(When David fled from Absalom). When enemies mock, the Lord is a shield and encouragement. Peaceful sleep is possible in the face of a superior enemy. "Deliverance belongs to the Lord."

Psalm 4: An evening prayer*

God has answered prayer in the past. Turning to God and meditating on him at night lead to peace.

Psalm 5: A morning prayer*

Boastful, deceitful and bloodthirsty men confront him but he will worship God who will deliver him.

Psalm 6: A prayer in suffering*

He pleads for his life in a time of physical and emotional pain. Even then he believes God will deliver.

Psalm 7: A prayer for protection and justice*

If he is a sinner, the psalmist agrees to judgment through enemies. But if he is not, he asks God to judge his enemies, which he will surely do.

Psalm 8: The majesty of God, and dignity of man*

Against the vastness of the universe, man seems unimportant. Yet God cares for him and puts him in charge of all creatures.

Psalm 9: praise of God's control over good and evil men*

This is an 'acrostic' psalm - the first letter of each verse follows the 22 letter Hebrew alphabet. Ten of the first eleven are in Psalm 9 but the rest are present imperfectly in Psalm 10. In an ancient Greek version - the Septuagint - the two psalms are one. The psalmist gives whole hearted thanks with gladness and exultation to God who sits enthroned forever as a stronghold for the oppressed. He brings judgment on the wicked.

Psalm 10: A prayer concerning the success of evil men.

(A continuation of the acrostic of Psalm 9). God sometimes seems to hide himself at times of trouble but he will answer the prayer of the meek.

Psalm 11: Taking refuge in the Lord who is in heaven*

There is no need to panic. God upholds justice - loving the righteous and judging evil.

Psalm 12: A prayer when wickedness triumphs and vileness is honoured*

Against the deceit and flattery of men God's promises are as pure as refined silver.

Psalm 13: A prayer in depression*

The Psalmist feels forgotten by God but his past experience of God's love make him sure he will once more be able to thank God.

Psalm 14: The foolishness of atheism*

The fool has said in his heart 'There is no God' so that he can live as he likes. But this way leads to judgment (Paul quotes verses 1-3 in Rom.3).

Psalm 15: The holy man will find God*

To enter the tabernacle a man should act and speak correctly, despise evil, keep his word and not oppress the poor or innocent.

Psalm 16: A prayer of faith*

The psalmist takes refuge in the Lord who blesses him with material blessings, wisdom and joyful pleasures for evermore. ("The lines" verse 6 were used to measure out the land a man inherited)

Psalm 17: An appeal for help form a clear conscience

The writer appeals for vindication of his innocence against his enemies.

Psalm 18: Praise for deliverance*

This is a revised form of David's victory song in 2 Samuel 22. The Lord is a rock, fortress and deliverer. David had despaired of life and cried to God to overcome the enemy and deliver him. God responded as a mighty warrior and rewarded David, for his righteousness.

Psalm 19 Both creation and the law reveal God's glory*

There is 'Natural Revelation' i.e. without words the beauty of creation tells us about God. There is 'Special Revelation' i.e. the law of God communicated to Moses in words. It is perfect, sure, fitting and pure. It gives life, wisdom, conviction of sin and rejoicing.

Psalm 20: A prayer for victory for the king*

As the people pray, the king speaks (verse 6). They will boast not of chariots and horses but of the Lord.

Psalm 21: A thanksgiving for the king and victory*

The king exults in God's help and is made glad with the joy of his presence. The enemy will be destroyed.

Psalm 22: A prayer in suffering*

The psalmist felt deserted by God but eventually regained faith. Jesus on the cross quoted verse 1 "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The psalm is an accurate description of Jesus suffering - separated from God, despised (verse 8 is almost what people said at the cross), bones out of joint, tongue dried, hands and feet pierced, clothes divided and lots cast for them. Yet the psalm finishes with words of trust and victory.

Psalm 23: The Lord, the good shepherd*

The Lord provides all we need, guides and protects us.

Psalm 24: A processional hymn of praise*

This may have been written when the ark was carried into Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6:12-15). The world belongs to God - only those who are pure may come to the holy place. The gates of the city must open to let in the king of glory (the presence of God in the ark).

Psalm 25: Prayer in trouble*

In this acrostic psalm the psalmist prays for deliverance from constant attacks and from guilt. The Lord in friendship guides the humble, reverent man. "All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness for those who keep his covenant" (verse 10).

PSALMS 26-50

The psalmists often justify themselves very vigorously and also curse and pray for vengeance on their enemies. Yet they knew that the law treated no-one as perfect and commanded that love be shown to enemies. (Exodus 23:4-5). Furthermore, *lex talionis* – an eye for an eye (see Moral Law on the 6th Commandment) did not encourage retaliation but limited it. Remember, however, that the psalmists knew they were imperfect and confessed it. They were claiming to be righteous compared with the wicked. Also, they often pictured themselves as defendants in a court or law before God the judge. We should also remember that God is holy and hates sin. We may even be embarrassed by the idea of the wrath of God. But it is biblical. The New Testament pictures Jesus returning and inflicting vengeance on the wicked (2 Thessalonians 1:7-8). However, we must condemn any *personal* vindictiveness and gloating over the fate of the wicked. (N.B. Psalms marked with * are attributed to David).

Psalm 26: The prayer of a righteous man*

The psalmist has lived in faith and obedience to God. He loves to worship in the holy place. He asks for God's grace and protection.

Psalm 27: The Lord will protect and not forsake me*

The psalmist knows this because he delights to worship in the house of the Lord and to wait upon God.

Psalm 28: The Lord hears a prayer for protection*

He prays for protection and deliverance and gains the assurance that the Lord, his strength, shield and refuge has heard.

Psalm 29: The awe-inspiring majesty of God*

The heavenly beings are invited to worship God. His voice is like a mighty waterfall, rolling thunder, flashing lightning and the wind that blows the forests into motion.

Psalm 30: The Lord brings joy after sorrow*

The psalm may date from the time when David made his census of the people (1 Chron.21) in disobedience to God and plague broke out. He affirms that God's anger is momentary, his favour for life; weeping may last the night but joy returns in the morning. God had turned David's mourning into dancing.

Psalm 31: The Lord is a refuge in distress*

In depression and anxiety, the psalmist affirms that the Lord is a rock. He trusts in God amidst bitter opposition from others. Jesus echoed verse 5 as he died.

Psalm 32: Confession brings the joy of forgiveness*

Not acknowledging sin becomes an intolerable burden spiritually and physically. Confession leads to the joy of forgiveness. God promises to lead and instruct the psalmist if he is not stubborn like a mule.

Psalm 33: Praise to the creator who is sovereign in world affairs

Praise God with instruments and loud shouts for he is upright and faithful. The earth is full of his steadfast love. His word created the world. He frustrates the 'wisdom' and actions of the ungodly.

Psalm 34: Praise to the Lord who comes to the aid of his people*

This is an acrostic psalm (see above on Psalm 9, 10). The title relates to the time when David feigned madness before King Achish - called Abimelech here - (see 1 Samuel 21:10 - 22:1). The psalmist gives continuous praise to God and boasts in him for he delivered him from all his fears. The Lord surrounds and delivers the righteous who are needy, troubled or broken hearted. He invites others to taste and see that the Lord is good.

Psalm 35: A prayer for vindication*

The psalmist, confident he is in the right, asks God to punish his enemies and clear his name.

Psalm 36: The steadfast love of the Lord*

The ungodly man plans evil but God's steadfast love extends to the heavens, giving refuge and life to the godly.

Psalm 37: The fate of the ungodly is unenviable*

This acrostic psalm has many proverbs in it. A good man may be tempted to envy the wicked. But evil people will be cut off. Their plots will misfire against themselves. But the righteous are encouraged to "take delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will act."

Psalm 38: A prayer in distress for forgiveness

The psalmist's guilt resulted in physical and mental pain. Family and friends keep their distance and opponents seek their opportunity to attack.

Psalm 39: A prayer of distress on the brevity of life*

The writer tries unsuccessfully to hold his tongue, lest he should dishonour God. He feels life is a mere breath and asks God to forgive and deliver him.

Psalm 40: A prayer telling of God's past deliverances and trusting him for more*

The Lord drew the psalmist up from 'the miry bog' set his feet on a rock. "He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God." He has told many publicly of this. But, still in trouble, he asks God's further help. (vv. 13-17 are repeated in Psalm 70).

Psalm 41: A prayer in sickness and loneliness*

The psalmist is ill. His enemies wait for his death. Some 'friends' visit him with deceitful wishes for his health. But he trusts in God who helps those who help others. Verse 13 is a formal ascription of praise to end Book One of the Psalms,

BOOK TWO

Psalm 42: Thirsting for God (a psalm of the sons of Korah)

(Korah, great grandson of Levi, perished when he rebelled against Moses -see Numbers 16. His

descendants had important duties, caring for the tabernacle, temple and sung worship). In exile in the north of Israel, where the river Jordan rises near Mt. Hermon, the psalmist longs for God like a thirsty hart. His neighbours mock his religion. He remembers leading the procession to God's house "with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving." He is very downcast but hopes to praise God once more.

Psalm 43

Seems to continue Psalm 42

Psalm 44: A prayer in confusion over defeat (a psalm of the sons of Korah)

The people had been relying on God - knowing he had given Israel miraculous victories in the past. But they are shattered at their defeat. They are disgraced and mocked. "Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever." Paul quotes verse 22 to describe the experience of Christians (Romans 8:36).

Psalm 45: A royal love song (a psalm of the sons of Korah)

This may have been used at the wedding of King Ahab of Israel to Jezebel princess of Tyre (see 1 Kings 16:31). Verse 12 mentions Tyre, and Ahab's palace at Samaria has beautiful carved ivories (verse 8). For many centuries, however, a deeper significance referring to the relationship between the messiah and the church, has been widely recognized. Verses 6-7 are referred to Christ in Hebrews 1:3-9.

Psalm 46: "A mighty fortress is our God" (a psalm of the sons of Korah)

This psalm may refer to Sennacherib's attack on Jerusalem (see 2 Kings 18; 2 Chron. 32) or may be anticipating events before the messiah comes. Luther's hymn is based on it - depicting God as a sovereign protector. "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way....." Verses 4-5 are paralleled in Revelation 22:1-5. God says amidst the troubles "Be still and know that I am God."

Psalm 47: Praise to the king of the nations (a psalm of the sons of Korah)

The psalmist encourages exuberant praise - clapping, shouting, loud songs of joy.

Psalm 48: Thanksgiving for the deliverance of Zion (a psalm of the sons of Korah)

Mount Zion (one of the mountains on which Jerusalem is built) often means, as here, the city of Jerusalem. Perhaps the occasion of the psalm is Sennacherib's retreat. Zion is not "in the far north" but the Assyrians regarded their gods as living in the far north so the psalmist may be referring to this idea.

Psalm 49: The inevitability of death (a psalm of the sons of Korah)

The rich men cannot 'buy off' death. All must die and take nothing with them. Generally speaking the psalmists had no clear idea of life after death.

Psalm 50: The divine judge calls his people to account (a psalm of Asaph)

God wants, not animal sacrifices, but real thanksgiving. He rebukes those who mouth obedience but hate discipline, keep bad company and speak deceitful slander.

PSALMS 51-75

(Psalms marked with * are attributed to David).

Psalm 51: A plea for forgiveness*

This is related to David's reaction when the prophet Nathan accused him of adultery with Bathsheba and the "murder" of Uriah (see 2 Sam. 12). The psalm, in contrast to modern superficial confessions,

acknowledges God is entitled to condemn the writer but pleads for mercy. God's forgiveness will be so complete that David will be able to teach sinners God's ways without hypocrisy (verse 13).

Psalm 52: The fate of the betrayer*

The title attributes the psalm to the time when Doeg betrayed David to Saul (1 Sam 2). God will judge the betrayer by 'uprooting' him from the land of the living. But the psalmist will be like a green olive tree rooted in the house of the Lord.

Psalm 53: The wickedness of mankind*

This is a revised version of Psalm 14.

Psalm 54: A prayer for deliverance*

The title relates this to the time when the Ziphites betrayed David to Saul (1 Sam 2). The Psalmist asks God, his helper, to vindicate him.

Psalm 55: Prayer of a man facing overwhelming odds*

This fits the situation when Ahithophel, David's trusted adviser, defected to Absalom in his rebellion against David. The writer wishes he could fly away like a dove from his overwhelming troubles. He utters his complaint and moans to God.

Psalm 56: A prayer for deliverance*

The title refers to the time David fled to Gath and pretended to be mad in order to escape from the Philistine King Achish (1 Sam. 21). Surrounded by enemies, he puts his trust in God and praises his word. He knows God is for him.

Psalm 57: A prayer for deliverance from cruel enemies*

This psalm is related to David's hiding from Saul in the cave (1 Sam. 22:1: 24). The psalmist knows God will send from heaven and save him. He will awake the dawn with his praises of God whose steadfast love and faithfulness are great to the heavens.

Psalm 58: A prayer for judgment*

The writer prays for God to inflict punishments on evil leaders (sarcastically called 'gods'). He perhaps descends to a feeling of personal revenge. (Verse 8: this refers to the popular belief that slugs and snails left slimy trails because they were melting as they went along).

Psalm 59: A prayer for protection*

The title refers to the time when Saul had David watched in order to kill him. (1 Sam. 19: 11-17). God laughs at his enemies. He is a strength, fortress and shield.

Psalm 60: A prayer after defeat *

The psalm is related to David's military campaigns - 2 Sam. 8. Although defeated, he gained the eventual victory. God is sovereign over Israel and over Israel's traditional enemies: Moab, Edom and Philistia. Moab will become like a bowl for washing a warrior's feet when he returns from battle. God will "cast his shoe" over Edom, which refers to an ancient tradition of taking possession of land by throwing a shoe on it. Others thought it may mean Edom would become like a slave to whom a warrior threw his shoes to carry or clean.

Psalm 61: A king's prayer for security*

The king feels his position is insecure and prays for safety to God - a rock, refuge and tower.

Psalm 62: A prayer of trust in God alone*

The psalmist waits for God in silence as his only rock, salvation and fortress. Man is unreliable and temporary - so are riches.

Psalm 63: A prayer of longing for God*

The title refers to David's time in the wilderness of Judah. The psalmist thirsts for God as he would for water in the wilderness. God's steadfast love is more important than life. He joyfully meditates on this.

Psalm 64: A prayer for deliverance*

The writer is under attack, but God will defeat the enemy.

Psalm 65: Praise to the creator*

God deserves praise. He delivers his people. He controls the earth and natural forces. He provides all things necessary for a rich harvest.

Psalm 66: Praise to God the deliverer

Make a joyful noise to God who has done wonderful things, e.g. the crossing of the Red Sea and Jordan. He delivered the people from affliction. He answers prayer. The psalmist realises "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened" (verse 18).

Psalm 67: A prayer for God's blessing to inspire universal praise

All nations will praise God as they see his justice and material provision.

Psalm 68: A battle hymn*

This was sung when the ark was brought into Jerusalem (and anniversaries of that event). The procession includes singers and girls playing timbrels. God scatters his enemies but the righteous are joyful, exultant and jubilant. He protects the needy. He led Israel from Egypt into the promised land.

Psalm 69: A prayer in depression*

(This psalm could refer to Jeremiah - see verses 2, 14-15, 35).

The psalmist's troubles seem to overwhelm him. He is in them because of obedience to God so pleads for deliverance for himself and judgment on his enemies. This Psalm is quoted often in the New Testament - e.g. John 2:17; 15:25; Romans 15:3.

Psalm 70: A prayer for help*

These verses appear at the end of Psalm 40.

Psalm 71: Prayer of an old man

The psalmist asks for the protection of the Lord he has enjoyed through life to be continued. He will praise God and witness to his faithfulness.

Psalm 72: A prayer for the king (attributed to Solomon)

The psalmist prays that the king may have justice, long life, prosperity and victory. The second book of psalms ends with a doxology (verses 10-19) and a statement that the prayers of David are ended. (This only refers to this book).

BOOK 3

Psalm 73: A prayer about the problem of evil (a psalm of Asaph)

Asaph was David's music director. The psalmist is envious of the arrogant and wicked, who not only escape punishment but do well in life. Does God not care? Is good behaviour in vain? He could not

understand until he entered God's sanctuary, then he saw how the wicked would end up. This delivered the psalmist from resentment.

Psalm 74: A lament over the destruction of the temple (a psalm of Asaph)

The destruction of the temple was, of course, deeply upsetting. There are no prophets to say how long the enemy will remain victorious. The psalmist prays for God to show his power.

Psalm 75: Praise to the judge of the earth (a psalm of Asaph)

God will judge the earth and he alone is able to do it. The wicked will be punished.

PSALMS 76-100

Psalm 76: God is victor (a psalm of Asaph)

God is glorious and “more majestic than the everlasting mountains.” He is victorious over all opposition.

Psalm 77: A prayer in trouble (a psalm of Asaph)

The psalmist wonders if God has spurned him and forgotten to be gracious. But he determines to remember God's wonderful works in history.

Psalm 78: The God of Israel's history (a psalm of Asaph)

The Ephraimites were the leading tribe in Israel under Joshua, and the Judges. But in David's time Judah took their place. The reasons were that they forgot God's deliverances of Israel and the punishments given for disobedience.

Psalm 79: A prayer for mercy after Jerusalem is ruined (a psalm of Asaph)

Great destruction and bloodshed took place when the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem in 581 BC (see 2 Kings 25:8ff).

Psalm 80: A prayer for Israel to be restored (a psalm of Asaph)

This psalm may fit between the exile of the northern kingdom of Israel (2 Kings 17) and the fall of Jerusalem. Israel is pictured as a great vine. The psalmist pleads for mercy.

Psalm 81: God laments that Israel will not listen to him (a psalm of Asaph)

The people are called to harvest celebrations (feast of tabernacles). God reminds them of the exodus and laments that they would not listen so did not receive his blessings.

Psalm 82: God condemns unjust judges (a psalm of Asaph)

They were showing partiality.

Psalm 83: A prayer when under attack (a psalm of Asaph)

The enemies, including Assyria, are planning to wipe out Israel. The psalmist asks God to repeat his ancient victories.

Psalm 84: A prayer rejoicing in the sanctuary (a psalm of the sons of Korah)

The psalmist longs to stay in the temple even as a doorkeeper. Those who stay in the temple are most fortunate, in his estimation. God bestows favour on them and does not withhold any good thing.

Psalm 85: A prayer and hope for revival (a psalm of the Sons of Korah)

God was gracious and forgiving in the past so the psalmist asks for revival. He exults in the hope of God showing his steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness and peace as never before.

Psalm 86: A prayer for deliverance*

The Lord is merciful, gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. He alone is God who does great things. So he can help the psalmist in his troubles.

Psalm 87: A prophecy of Jerusalem's glorious future (a psalm of the sons of Korah)

The Lord has chosen Jerusalem in his love to be a capital of a great nation which includes her former enemies. ("Rahab" here means Egypt).

Psalm 88: A prayer in desperation (a psalm of the Sons of Koran by Heman)

(See 1 Chron.15:17, 19) The psalmist is in deeper gloom, than in any other psalm. He feels he is dying and has no hope beyond the grave. God is not answering his prayer but is rather adding to his troubles.

Psalm 89: God the father and judge of Israel (a psalm of Ethan)

(See 1 Chron. 15:17, 19) God's steadfast love, established forever and firm as the heavens is to be praised. He has shown righteousness and justice in Israel's history. So "Blessed are the people who know the festal shout" (v. 15). God made his covenant with David for ever. But he is now angry with his people who have broken the covenant.

BOOK FOUR

Psalm 90: Eternal God and mortal man (a psalm of Moses)

God is from everlasting to everlasting. To him a thousand years is as yesterday. Man is as temporary as a blade of grass. This life is under God's judgment and the psalmist pleads for mercy.

Psalm 91: God is a refuge and a fortress

The righteous man dwells in the shadow of the Almighty. He trusts God who protects him day and night although thousands fall beside him.

Psalm 92: A song for the Sabbath

It is good to praise God with music and song because he makes us glad. He judges the wicked but the righteous flourish like a green tree.

Psalm 93: The Lord is Sovereign

He is robed in majesty and strength and sits on an eternal throne. The floods (nations opposing God) have roared against him to no avail. His decrees are very sure.

Psalm 94: God the judge of the whole earth

The writer prays for just punishment for the wicked who are stupid. God's chastening is a blessing because through it he teaches many lessons. The Lord blesses the afflicted.

Psalm 95: "O come, let us sing to the Lord" (The Venite).

The psalmist invites us to make a joyful noise in thanksgiving and praise to God, the creator, rather than hardening our hearts against him.

Psalm 96: "Worship the Lord in holy array"

"Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised honour and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary." Let the whole creation praise him.

Psalm 97: "The Lord reigns"

"Clouds and thick darkness are round about him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.

Fire goes before him . . . his lightnings lighten the world; the earth sees and trembles.” “You are exalted far above all gods.” “The Lord loves those who hate evil.”

Psalm 98: “O Sing to the Lord a new song” (Cantate Domino).

“Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him ... Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; make music to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing.” Let the seas praise God for He comes to judge the earth fairly.

Psalm 99: “He is holy”

“He sits enthroned between the cherubim, let the earth shake. ... Let them praise your great and awesome name— he is holy. ... Exalt the LORD our God and worship at his footstool; he is holy.”

Psalm 100: “Make a joyful noise to the Lord” (The Jubilate Deo).

Serve God with gladness, singing, thanksgiving and praise because he is the Good Shepherd whose steadfast love is eternal.

PSALMS 101-125

(Psalms marked with * are attributed to David)

Psalm 101: The king’s promise to oppose

He will uphold loyalty, justice and integrity. He will oppose arrogance, slander and deceit.

Psalm 102: A prayer in distress

The Psalmist is physically sick, sleepless and taunted by enemies. Mortal life is fleeting, but God is king for ever. He created the universe but he is not subject to change. He will answer the prayer and set his people free.

Psalm 103: A thanksgiving for the healing forgiveness of God

The psalmist recalls all God’s benefits - forgiveness and healing, redemption and satisfaction. He vindicates his people and has mercy on their sinfulness and weakness. Unlike man, God’s steadfast love and rule are everlasting.

Psalm 104: Praise to the creator

God is very great. He is covered in light and rides on the winds amidst clouds and lightning. He created sea, mountains, springs and rivers, plants and trees, heavenly bodies and he provides for all his creatures.

Psalm 105: Praise for God’s faithfulness and his covenant with Israel

God faithfully blessed Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants. He delivered Israel from Egypt by sending plagues on the Egyptians. He kept them in the wilderness and gave them the promised land.

Psalm 106: A confession of of Israel’s unfaithfulness to God

The Psalmist confesses that Israel rebelled in the wilderness. They despised the promised land and worshipped idols. So they were defeated by their enemies. They repented and were delivered - only to rebel again.

BOOK 5

Psalm 107: Praise to God the deliverer

The lost, hungry traveller, the prisoner in darkness and gloom, the sick, the sailor in a violent storm all cry to the Lord and are delivered.

Psalm 108: Praise to God the victor

This psalm, combines Psalm 57:7-11 and Psalm 60:5-12.

Psalm 109: A prayer for vindication and deliverance

The writer's opponents accuse him in return for his love and prayers. He prays judgment against them but seems to lapse into personal vengeance (see introduction to Psalms 26-50).

Psalm 110: The eternal priest-king

It is clear that this psalm ultimately refers to Christ - the eternal priest king whose enemies will, in the end, be shattered (see Matthew 22:41-46; Luke 22:69; Hebrews 5:8-10; 10:12-13).

Psalm 111: Praise to God who works wonders

An acrostic psalm (see on psalm 9). Wholehearted praise is due to God for his wonderful works which are full of honour and majesty. He provides for his people in grace and mercy.

Psalm 112: The happiness of the God-fearing man

Another acrostic psalm (See on psalm 9). The man who obeys God and loves his neighbour will be rewarded with material benefits, security and peace of mind.

Psalms 113-118 are linked with the Feasts of Tabernacles (Harvest) and Passover. 113-114 are sung before Passover and 115-118 after the meal.

Psalm 113: The majesty of God

The Lord is highly exalted and worthy of continuous, universal praise. He is very concerned for the poor and needy.

Psalm 114: The passover hymn

The crossing of the Red Sea and Jordan and the water from the rock show God's power.

Psalm 115: God is deliverer-idols are useless

Glory belongs to God's name alone. He is sovereign and helps his people. Idols are useless pieces of metal.

Psalm 116: Thanksgiving for deliverance

This psalm, sung by Jesus at the Last Supper, praises God for deliverance from death and suffering. The psalmist will give a thank offering in the temple.

Psalm 117: Praise to God for his love and faithfulness

Psalm 118: A processional hymn for the feast of tabernacles

The king, priests and people in procession to the temple thank God for his deliverance. "The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me? It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in humans." They cut off their enemies. In verses 19-27 the procession carrying branches moves from the temple gateway to the altar.

Psalm 119: Thanksgiving for God's Word.

This is an acrostic Psalm with 22 eight verse sections. Each section begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet and each verse in the section begins with the same letter. The Psalmist uses ten different words to describe God's law and most verses contain one of these words: God's law, testimonies (instruction), precepts, statutes, ordinances (decrees), word, ways, promises and judgments (rulings).

1. Obedience to God's law brings true happiness so the psalmist prays he may obey it and understand it. (verses 1-8).

2. He loves God's law which is a protection and delight (verses 9-16).
3. It is a comfort in persecution (verses 17-24).
4. He prays for faithfulness to the Lord in trials (verses 25-32).
5. Prayers for wisdom (verses 33-40).
6. Prayers for courage to witness (verses 41-48).
7. God's law comforts in trials (verses 49-56).
8. He loves God and the law (verses 57-64).
9. God is good to him even in affliction (verses 65-72).
10. A prayer for comfort so that others may be encouraged (verses 73-80).
11. He perseveres in faith when deliverance is delayed (verses 81-63).
12. God's law is eternal, unchangeable and complete (verses 89-96).
13. God's law is a delightful and profitable study (verses 97-104).
14. He resolves to obey God's law whatever the risk (verses 105-112).
15. The Psalmist has hope, the wicked are hopeless (verses 113-120).
16. He pleads for God's intervention (verses 121-128).
17. God's law is wonderful, he prays to keep it and grieves that others don't (verses 129-136).
18. He loves and reverences God's righteous pure law (verses 137-144).
19. He prays to be faithful amongst the unfaithful (verses 145-152).
20. Urgent prayers for deliverance (verses 153-160).
21. He has sincerely kept God's law with awe, joy, love and gratitude (verses 161-168).
22. He prays for understanding, deliverance, gratitude, help and guidance (verses 169-176).

Psalms 120-134 called "Songs of Ascents" were probably songs sung by pilgrims approaching Jerusalem for the three great annual feasts. They focus on the city.

Psalm 120: A prayer for deliverance from deceitful tongues.

Some people enjoy creating strife.

Psalm 121: God the sovereign protector

The creator unceasingly keeps and protects his people. (The hills may be those on which Jerusalem is built).

Psalm 122: Jerusalem the holy city

The psalmist rejoices in the significance of Jerusalem as the centre of Israel's worship and life. He prays for the peace of Jerusalem.

Psalm 123: A prayer for mercy

Psalm 124: Praise to God the deliverer

Without God's help Israel would have been overcome by the enemy.

Psalm 125: The security of trusting in God

Those who trust God are as secure as the mountains on which Jerusalem (Zion) is built. The Lord surrounds his people and will deliver Jerusalem from foreign domination.

PSALMS 126-150

Psalm 126: Joy and Sorrow

The Lord restored Zion's fortunes and so gave them great joy. Now they need him to do it again. This Psalm is often associated with the exile.

Psalm 127: The futility of merely human plans (attributed to Solomon)

Working hard, and anxiously is of no value unless it is God's plan in which we are involved.

Psalm 128: The blessings of obedience

The man who obeys God will be rewarded with happiness, prosperity and a happy family life.

Psalm 129: A prayer for justice in the face of persecution

Israel has been badly treated and pleads for vindication.

Psalm 130: A prayer in guilt and depression

The psalmist cries 'out of depths' and acknowledges he does not deserve God's forgiveness. Nevertheless, he waits for the Lord to show mercy.

Psalm 131: A prayer of childlike trust (attributed to David)

The writer is not striving and worrying, but resting in God, as a baby rests secure in its mother's arms.

Psalm 132: A psalm about the ark being brought to Jerusalem

(See 2 Sam. 6-7). David vowed to bring it to Jerusalem from Jair (i.e. Kiriathjearim) so that Jerusalem could be the religious capital. God promised an eternal dynasty (royal succession).

Psalm 133: A Psalm in praise of unity

Unity is like the precious oil used to anoint the high priest. It is like the exceptionally heavy and life-giving dew on Mt. Hermon.

Psalm 134: A psalm for the temple nightwatch

This is the last song of ascent.

Psalm 135 A psalm of praise

The Lord is good. He chose Israel. In sovereign power he created the world. He saved Israel from Egypt and brought them into the promised land.

Psalm 136: The 'Great Praise' (Hallel)

The story of creation, redemption and providence is a cause of praise to God. The psalm is punctuated in each verse with reference to "his steadfast love" which "endures for ever."

Psalm 137: A lament in exile

The exiles in Babylon could not sing praises because Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed. Their captors taunted them by asking them to sing joyful songs. They long for Jerusalem and pray for Babylon to be punished.

Psalm 138: A psalm of praise for God's faithfulness and sovereignty (attributed to David)

The psalmist gives heartfelt thanks to God who has exalted his name and his word. Nevertheless, God cares for mere men, preserves the righteous in trouble and works out his purpose for the psalmist's life.

Psalm 139: God's eternal presence with an intimate knowledge of us (attributed to David)

God knows even our secret thoughts. There is no way to escape from his knowledge. He knew us when we were being formed in the womb. The psalmist ends by asking God to search his thoughts to see if there is any wicked way in him.

Psalm 140: Prayer for deliverance (attributed to David).

The psalmist knows that “the LORD secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy.” He is surrounded by unscrupulous enemies and asks for God to preserve him.

Psalm 141: A prayer against returning evil for evil (attributed to David)

Attacked on all sides the writer prays “Set a guard over my mouth, LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips.” He doesn't want to retaliate in an evil way.

Psalm 142: The prayer of a fugitive (attributed to David when he was hiding in the cave)

The psalmist honestly but reverently pours out his complaint before the Lord.

Psalm 143: A prayer in depression (attributed to David).

The writer is at his wit's end. He longs to experience God as he once did. He knows he does not deserve God's help, but asks God to show him the way of obedience.

Psalm 144: A prayer to the God of victory (attributed to David).

God is a rock, fortress, stronghold and deliverer. Man is mere breath. God will show his might in giving his people the victory.

Psalms 145-150 are hymns of praise used by Jews today in daily prayer. Each begins and ends with “Alleluia” except 145

Psalm 145: Great is the Lord (attributed to David)

An acrostic psalm (See Psalm 9). “Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom.” “The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.” “The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does. The LORD upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down.” “The LORD is righteous in all his ways and faithful in all he does.

Psalm 146: “Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob”

“Do not put your trust in princes.” But trust God, the eternal, faithful creator, judge, provider, lover and protector.

Psalm 147: “Great is our Lord and mighty in power”

“He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.” “His understanding has no limit.” He is the God of creation, Lord of the seasons, King of the nations. “The LORD delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love.”

Psalm 148: “Praise the Lord”

All creation – angels, sun, moon, stars, the sea, the elements, nature and human beings should praise the Lord.

Psalm 149: “Let Israel rejoice in their Maker”

The psalmist encourages joyful praise to God in a new song, dancing and melody, and defeat of evil.

Psalm 150: “Let everything that has breath praise the LORD”

This is the climax of the psalms. Every instrument with every living thing is to praise the Lord.

PROVERBS

The book is a textbook of wise sayings which trained young men in the art of wisdom. It is important to remember that they are *generalizations*. There may be exceptions to them. The essence of a proverb is to be a short, ‘pithy’, direct statement without qualifications which would weaken it. The book was probably compiled in the days of Israel’s early kings. Solomon, who wrote 3,000 proverbs (1 Kings 4:32-34) was obviously involved with the book. He had connections by marriage with Egypt and may have known the “Teaching of Amenemope” which is paralleled in Proverbs 22:17-23; 14. Hezekiah edited some of the book (25:1). We look first at:

WISDOM

Wisdom defined

It means receiving instruction and acting justly (1:3-4). It is loyalty and faithfulness (3:3-4).

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (1:7; 9:10)

Humility comes before honour (15:33). “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil” (3:5-7; cf. 21:30).

He created the world by wisdom (3:19).

Wisdom is to be sought like treasure

It is more precious than rubies and gold (3:15, 16:16).

Wisdom gives security

Godly wisdom, understanding, sound judgement and discretion will remove the fear of sudden disaster because the Lord will be with us (3:21-26; 24:5).

Wisdom involves accepting discipline and reproof

“My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline, and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in” (3:11-12 cf. 12:1; 13:18).

Wisdom involves obeying God’s word

If we do not obey God’s word our prayers will not be answered (28:9, cf. 10:8; 14:12; 21:2).

Wisdom involves heeding advice

“The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice” (12:15, cf. 26:26).

Wisdom involves being cautious

“The simple believe anything” and the “fool is hotheaded” but we should fear the LORD and shun evil (14:15-16). We must *always* listen to both sides of a story (18:17, 25:7-10). We should avoid getting involved in other people’s quarrels (26:17).

Wisdom involves not associating with fools (13:20)

THE FAMILY

Adultery and fornication condemned

With characteristic frankness Proverbs condemns adultery. “For the lips of the adulterous woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave” (5:3-5; 6:25-29, 32; 23:27-28). The book describes the deception of the seductress (see 2:16-19; 7:5-27 and 9:13-18). Proverbs makes it clear that an adulterer is a fool.

Joyful commitment to one’s wife advised

Such commitment will gain the Lord's favour (18:22 cf. 5:15-19).

A nagging wife condemned

A nagging wife is "like the dripping of a leaky roof in a rainstorm" (27:15-16 cf. 21:9, 19).

A good wife described

31:10-31. This is an acrostic poem about the ideal wife. "She is administrator, trader, craftswoman, philanthropist and guide, whose influence spreads far beyond her home, though it is centred there and though her achievements are (as she would wish) valued most of all for their contribution to her husband's fortune and good standing" (Kidner). She is responsible, capable, hard-working and completely trustworthy.

The training and disciplining of children encouraged

Good early training of a child will stand him or her in good stead to behave wisely as an adult. A child must be disciplined (22:6, 15; 13:24; 19:18 see also 23:13 and 29:15, 17).

THE RIGHTEOUS AND THE WICKED

God sees every action of human beings

God keeps a constant vigil over us and he weighs our motives (15:3; 16:2).

He rewards the good

"When the LORD takes pleasure in anyone's way, he causes their enemies to make peace with them" (16:7).

He punishes evil

There are many references to this throughout the book

We must therefore hate evil

If we fear God we will hate evil as he does (8:13). We must not justify (17:15). We must not give way to the wicked (25:26).

We must act justly (21:3).

We must resist temptation

See 1:8-19; 22.

We must practise self-control (25:28).

We must not be disturbed by the wicked

They will reap their reward (24:19-20).

We must show kindness

This is the case even with enemies. "Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when they stumble, do not let your heart rejoice, or the LORD will see and disapprove and turn his wrath away from them" (24:17-18). "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you" (25:21-22). See also 12:10.

THE TONGUE

The power of the tongue

"The tongue has the power of life and death" (18:21).

Noble speech

We must speak in a way which is trustworthy and just (8:6-9).

Healing speech

“Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up” (12:25). “Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones” (16:24).

Correcting speech

“Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses” (27:5-6 cf. 25:12; 28:23).

Lying speech

The Lord hates lying (12:22, cf. 4:24; 6:12-15, 17-19).

Gossip

A gossip creates division even amongst close friends (16:28). “Without wood a fire goes out; without a gossip a quarrel dies down The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to the inmost parts” (26:20, 22 cf. 18:8).

Insensitive speech

“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (15:1). “Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day, or like vinegar poured on a wound, is one who sings songs to a heavy heart” (25:20).

Hasty speech

We need to know when to keep quiet and to guard our tongues (10:19; 13:3; 17:27-28). Fools delight in airing their own opinions (18:2 cf. 18:13; 20:3; 21:23; 23:9; 29:20).

LAZINESS AND WORK

The ‘ sluggard ’ (lazy person) is hinged to his bed (26:14) and loves to sleep so that his path and field are overgrown (15:19; 24:30-34). He doesn't cultivate his land (20:4). He ought to take example from the busy ant (6:6-11) but he is a burden on others (10:26). He craves many things but through laziness receives nothing. (13:4). The writer encourages toil rather than talk (14:23). Slackness at work is condemned (18:9). Love of sleep can lead to ruin (20:13).

RICH AND POOR

Generosity encouraged

We should honour God with our wealth (3:9-10) and be generous to those in need (3:27-28). God will prosper a generous person (11:24-25; 19:17; 28:27).

Simple lifestyle commended

Affluence can lead to discontent (15:16) and can undermine commitment to God (30:8-9).

Honest gain commended

Dishonest gain will not ultimately satisfy (10:2; 20:17).

Trust in riches discouraged

Riches will ultimately fail us (11:28).

Oppression of the poor forbidden

Oppression of the poor shows contempt for God (14:31; 17:5).

BUSINESS PRACTICE AND PLANS

Scrupulous honesty is called for – the Lord hates dishonesty (11:1). ‘ Get rich quick ’ is a deceptive aim (13:11). In planning we cannot boast of tomorrow. Only God’s purpose will prevail so we should

commit our way to him. We don't know what the future will bring (27:1). Only God's purposes will prevail (19:21).

PRIDE AND HUMILITY

God hates pride and arrogance (8:13; 16: 5). Pride leads to downfall (11:2; 16:18; 26:12). We should not sing our own praise but rather confess our sins (27:2; 28:13).

ANGER

Quick tempered people are fools (29:11 cf. 14:17, 29; 15:18) so don't associate with them (22:24-25). The wise man is self-controlled (16:32). He overlooks insults and does not retaliate (12:16; 19:11; 24:29).

ECCLESIASTES

The title is a Greek translation for 'The Preacher' or 'The Speaker' which is probably a pseudonym for Solomon. He was a man who had everything - riches, fame, power and women. Yet here he speaks of the futility of life without God.

LIFE 'UNDER THE SUN' – I.E. WITHOUT GOD

Life is futile

It is empty - without meaning and purpose (1:2). It is chasing after the wind (1:14).

Death is inevitable

This is graphically described in 12:1-8. Old age creeps on with all its weaknesses then death comes and dust returns to dust.

Life is a circle

Nature goes through its cycles sunrise and sunset, weather patterns, the water cycle "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun" (1:4-9).

Life is unfair

Evil prospers and the righteous come to grief (7:15).

Riches are futile

The writer describes his extremely 'successful' life as king - gaining riches find pleasures. But he concludes: We toil, strive and suffer anxiety to pile up riches then leave them to other people who may not use them wisely. Money never satisfies. Riches only lead to sleepless nights (5:1 0-15).

Goodness and wisdom are pointless

It creates burdens for a man who will die like the wicked and foolish anyway, and be forgotten (2:16).

LIFE WITH GOD

God gives joy

God gives joy and satisfaction in ordinary activities - eating, drinking, relating to family and working 2:24-26; 3: 12-13; 5:18-20; 9:7-10).

God gives satisfaction

Man yearns for the eternal. "He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end" (3:11 cf. 4:6).

Knowing God gives confidence in the day of trouble (7:14; 11:4).

God will judge every man

We shall all be judged for everything we have done (3:17). The wicked seem to prosper but ultimately will be condemned (8:10-13).

God calls us to obedience

God is completely sovereign (3:14). We should make a priority of listening to him and not lightly make promises to him (5:1-2, 4). We must never forget him (12:1). Rather we should live in the light of God's judgment (11:9). "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (12:13-14).

THE SONG OF SOLOMON

(or Song of songs, or Canticles)

The book is a series of love poems, said to be six in number. They have often been ‘spiritualized’ to refer to God’s love for Israel or Christ’s love for his bride the church. Whatever truth there may be in such interpretations the primary purpose of the book is to exult in physical attraction and love. Some say the songs were sung during the week long wedding feast. Solomon is referred to but since he was king and had many wives he could hardly be described as a country shepherd or as a man who only had eyes for one girl. Some have therefore suggested that Solomon was trying to win the girl, but she remained true to her shepherd lover. This beautiful book certainly shows that God intended man fully to enjoy this pure gift of physical love within the laws of Scripture. (The division between the words of the various speakers which we follow is not the only possible scheme).

THE FIRST POEM (1:1-2:7)

After the title (v. 1) the bride expresses longing for her lover’s kisses and the fragrance of the perfume he would use as an oriental bridegroom (vv. 2-4). Her companions express their pleasure in her love in the second half of verse 4.

The bride addresses ‘the daughters of Jerusalem’ - her companions (vv 5-7). These were probably the court or harem. She contrasts her own sun-tanned, dark skin with the paler skin of the companions who, unlike her, were protected from the sun. She describes herself as being as black as Bedouin (Kedar) tents, and yet beautiful. She has been compelled to do open-air work by her family. She longs to know where her beloved is. The bridegroom (vv. 8-10) invites her to follow him and praises her jewelled beauty. Her companions (v. 11) promise to give her more jewels. She likens her beloved (vv. 12-14) to the ‘sachet’ of fragrant myrrh which, suspended from her neck, hung between her breasts, or to henna blossoms which have a red cosmetic dye and came from the oasis of Engedi near the Dead Sea. He comments on the softness of her eyes and she responds (v. 16). He recalls the countryside (or the royal summerhouse) where they had been together (vv. 16-17). When she compares herself to a rose of Sharon or pure lily (2:1) he replies that she is like a lily amongst thorns - the thorns being other girls. To her he was like an apple tree and she liked to sit in his shadow. He took her inside for a banquet (vv. 3-6). Then (v. 7) he charges her companions not to press her to love him but to allow love to grow naturally.

THE SECOND POEM (2: 8 -3:5).

The bride (vv. 8-13) pictures her lover rushing to be with her and wanting her to come out with him after the confinement of winter to enjoy the springtime countryside. He (v. 14) expresses a longing to see her, and the companions (v. 15) ask him to prevent the jackals damaging the spring blossoms and preventing the fruit developing. She longs for him to come (vv.16-17). At night (chap. 3:1-4) she dreams of him. In the dream she is desperate to find him and wanders the streets asking the watchmen where he was. Finding him, she brought him to her mother’s home. He repeats his charge to the companions (v. 5).

THE THIRD POEM (3:6-5:1)

The companions describe the grand procession of King Solomon (vv. 6-11). He is carried on a litter surrounded by sixty warriors. His throne is of cedar with silver posts, a gold back or cover, and seats covered with expensive purple cloth. The companions encourage one another to go and see Solomon. The bridegroom (4:1-12) using oriental imagery from the countryside glories in her physical beauty: her soft eyes, her black hair, her white even teeth, her red lips, her fresh cheeks, her neck and breasts. He invites her to come from the mountains of Lebanon and once more glories in her love and physical beauty. She is like a beautiful garden. She invites him to come and enjoy his ‘garden’ and he

responds by coming to gather the perfume, fruit and sweetness of the 'garden', i.e. his beloved.

THE FOURTH POEM (5:2-6:3)

Again the bride has a dream (5:2-8). She dreamt that her beloved had come to the door of her room. He was cold and wet from the dew and asked her to let him in. She was undressed and reluctant to have to get dressed. He tried the door and this roused her to go and let him in. But when she had opened the door he had gone. She felt desperate and wandered the streets looking for him. The watchmen, assuming she was an immoral woman, maltreated her. She charges her companions to tell her beloved how much she loves him. They (v. 9) ask what is special about him.

She replies by describing him in oriental terms (vv.10-16). It is as if she were describing a magnificent statue of her lover. She describes him as fair and ruddy, with black wavy hair. He is a man in ten thousand. She compliments his beautiful eyes, face and lips. His body is handsome and strong. His legs are powerful. He is as majestic as a mountain of Lebanon or as a great cedar tree. Her companions ask her where they may find him (6:1). She replies (v.2-5) that he has gone to his garden. (Gardens were usually at a distance from the house perhaps over a mile away).

THE FIFTH POEM (6:4-8:4)

The bridegroom again praises his bride (vv.4-12). She is as beautiful as the lovely old city of Tirzah (early capital of the northern kingdom of Israel) or as the beloved Jerusalem. He repeats the description in chapter 4:1-3. In the court there are many queens and concubines. Yet this lowly dark-skinned girl is the one for him. He had gone down to his garden and began to think of her. (The Hebrew of verse 12 is unclear). The companions call for the bride to return that they may see her (v.13). (Shulam is an unknown place). Then the bridegroom continues to praise her as she dances. He glories in her graceful legs and waist, her beautiful breasts, neck, face and eyes, and her flowing hair. He longs to embrace, caress and kiss her. She responds by inviting him to go with her out into the countryside to see the beauties and to share their love (7:10-8:3). She wishes he were her brother in the sense that then she could kiss him in public without criticism and could take him home with her. He repeats his charge to the companions (v. 4, see 2:7, 3:5).

THE SIXTH POEM (8:5-14)

The companions (v.5) ask who is approaching with her beloved. The bridegroom then speaks to his bride (v.5-7) calling for exclusive love, for love is strong as death and jealousy as cruel as the grave. Then there is reference to a little sister (vv. 8-10) who is not yet a woman. The speaker here could be the bride, the companions referring to the bride, or the woman's brothers. Perhaps the meaning is that the girl should be adorned to make her more attractive to a possible partner (v.9). Others think the brothers were seeking to protect the bride's honour and she replied that she had kept her honour. The bride (or the bridegroom) then speaks (v. 11-12) of Solomon's 'vineyard, which probably is poetic for his harem. He can keep it. She is not for sale but belongs to her lover. He asks to hear her voice (v. 13). She replies inviting him to come to her (v.14).

THE PROPHETS

This is the third main section of the Old Testament. The prophets were sent at a time of the nation's decline, to call the people to repent of idolatry, immorality and superficial religious rituals. Animal sacrifices without obedience are condemned. The true prophets called the nation to remember the exodus and to obey the law of Moses. God called them to be close to him and revealed his secrets to them. So they were able to speak with authority "Thus says the Lord . . ." In their message they stressed (a) God is Lord of history (b) the first priority is to be right with God (c) moral obedience is the basis of religion and society. (d) God will judge the earth but he forgives the penitent, (e) the messiah is coming to set up his kingdom.

PROPHETIC LANGUAGE: The prophets, being men of their age, used Ancient Near Eastern concepts and terminology to express genuine divinely-inspired prophetic messages and this terminology, not just the prophetic concepts behind it, was attributed to God. Hence a good deal of the condemnatory prophetic language in the OT does not appear to square with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (however, we must remember the NT speaks of the sternness of God).

The prophets certainly spoke from God (2 Peter 1:20-21) but, on the principle of the incarnation, God communicated with the Israelites as Ancient Near Eastern people using the concepts and terminology of their culture (see above on Progressive Revelation).

As some still do nowadays, Ancient Near Eastern people saw bad events as divine judgment. Sometimes the prophets foresaw such events and proclaimed them as coming judgment. That is not to say that God was not communicating his judgment through these events. In fact they spoke very effectively to the people. Nor is it saying that God does not judge people through bad events. We today might say he would remove his protection from the people if they were disobedient.

The following list places the prophets in their historical circumstances. There are four major prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, and 12 'minor' prophets.

PROPHETS BEFORE THE EXILE

Amos from Tekoah in Judah prophesied to Israel in the reign of Jereboam II, Zechariah, Shallum and Menahem - all kings of Israel between 793-742BC. He condemned the surrounding nations for their cruelty and Israel for its selfish oppression of the poor warning that Assyria would capture them.

Jonah sailed from Joppa and then prophesied to Nineveh in Assyria during Amos' lifetime.

Hosea from Israel prophesied to Israel during the reigns in which Amos did (i.e. from about 755BC) but also in the reigns of Pekahiah, Pekah and Hoshea until the fall of Samaria (the capital) in 722BC. He had warned them that this would happen.

Isaiah from Judah prophesied in Jerusalem whilst Hosea did in Israel and during the reigns of Azariah (Uzziah), Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah and Manasseh (approx. 748-690BC). During his ministry Sennacherib king of Assyria besieged Jerusalem (about 700BC). He foretold the Babylonians would capture Jerusalem but that there would be a future age of peace. Many scholars think that Isaiah only wrote chapters 1-39 and at least one other unnamed prophet wrote chapters 40-66. Others argue that the similarities between the two sections show they were written by the same person but that chapters 40-66 were written much later than chapters 1-39.

Micah from Judah ministered for about the same period as Isaiah (approx. 735-695 BC). He warned of both the Assyrian and Babylonian attacks and foretold the fall of both Samaria (which he saw happen in 722BC) and of Jerusalem.

Then there was a period of about 50 years (most of Manasseh's evil reign over Judah) in which no prophets are recorded until:

Nahum from Judah prophesied the destruction of Nineveh as a punishment for the cruelty of the Assyrians. He ministered during the reigns of Amon and Josiah (approx. 645-635BC). (Nineveh fell to the Babylonians in 612BC).

Zephaniah from Judah during Josiah's reign (approx. 635-625BC) condemned idolatry and predicted disaster for the surrounding nations and the fall and restoration of Jerusalem. Josiah initiated reforms in Judah after rediscovering the law (Deuteronomy). But this only delayed the judgment.

PROPHETS DURING INVASION AND EXILE

Habakkuk from Judah prophesied between 625 and 600BC. He wrestled with the problem of evil and God's justice. How could he allow the cruel Babylonians to defeat his people?

Jeremiah was born about 640BC in Anathoth near Jerusalem and was called to be a prophet in 627BC during Josiah's reign. He continually predicted the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. During his lifetime the Babylonians took Nineveh (612BC) and defeated Egypt (605BC). He saw King Jehohaz deported to Egypt (609BC), Jehoiakim put on the throne by Egypt, become vassal to Babylon and then defect to Egypt (609-597BC). Then in 597BC Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon captured Jerusalem and King Jehoiachin, with other leaders, was deported to Babylon. Zedekiah was appointed king by Nebuchadnezzar but rebelled. So Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BC and deported all the people. Three months later Gedaliah, governor of Jerusalem, was murdered and Jeremiah was taken to Egypt. (Lamentations, sometimes attributed to Jeremiah, fits in the period at the end of Jeremiah's life).

Daniel had been exiled to Babylon from Judah as a boy in 605BC. When Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem he became a chief minister in the Babylonian court and prophesied the downfall of Babylon and succeeding empires. His ministry lasted until just after Zerubbabel led the first exiles back to Judah in 538/7BC, following the fall of Babylon to the Persians.

Ezekiel was exiled to Babylon from Judah in 597BC. In 592BC, at the age of 30, God called him to be a prophet. He prophesied the downfall of Judah's enemies and encouraged the exiles to look for the return to their land. He ministered until about 575BC.

Obadiah, meanwhile, prophesied back in Edom against that nation's attack on Judah at the time of the Babylonian invasion. He ministered from the time Jeremiah was taken to Egypt (587BC) until about 575 BC.

PROPHETS AFTER THE RETURN OF ISRAEL

Haggai prophesied in Judah in 520BC - 18 years after the first Jews had returned from exile under Zerubbabel. He urged them to put the rebuilding of temple before their own interests.

Zechariah prophesied in Judah at the same time as Haggai (between 520 and 518BC). He predicted judgment on Judah's enemies and a time when all nations would come to worship at Jerusalem. The temple was rebuilt during the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah.

Malachi prophesied in Judah in 460-430BC - some 80 years after Haggai and Zechariah. He recalled the Jews to right priorities. They had become disillusioned. Ezra's party had returned from exile in 453BC bringing many riches and punishing Jews who had married pagans. In 445BC Nehemiah returned to rebuild Jerusalem. The book of Malachi probably dates from just before Nehemiah's

return. Malachi reminds the Jews that the messiah is coming,

Joel predicts disaster sweeping the land like locusts and also spoke of great glory to follow. His dates are unknown and guesses have varied from the 8th to the 4th century BC.

ISAIAH

Isaiah was called to be a prophet in the year King Uzziah died - about 740 BC. The book is a collection of visions, and prophecies from him over 40 years of ministry. It is difficult to follow as he moves from his contemporary experience (with Assyria ready to pounce) to God's final judgment and the reign of universal peace.

GOD'S MESSAGE FOR JUDAH AND JERUSALEM (chap. 1-5)

Judah is very corrupt (chap. 1)

The nation has rebelled against God. They are sinful and have despised the Holy One of Israel (Isaiah's special title for God). The nation is sick. The Assyrians have invaded it. The northern kingdom of Israel has fallen, and only Zion (Jerusalem) is left. God likens Jerusalem to the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. He has had enough of superficial animal sacrifices. "I cannot bear your worthless assemblies" (1:13). He hates their feasts and won't listen to their prayers. They must cleanse themselves and restore justice. "'Come now, let us settle the matter,' says the LORD. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool'" (1:18). Bribery, swindling and corruption characterize Jerusalem. God will purify them through judgment. He will restore justice and destroy idolatry - which took place in sacred groves of oak trees (1:29).

The day of the Lord predicted (chaps. 2-4).

Jerusalem will become the centre of worship for the whole world. God will judge the world and usher in universal peace (2:1-5). But before that Judah will be punished for its occult activities and idolatry. Every proud person will be humbled (2:6-22). The leaders of the nation will be taken away and inadequate leaders will replace them (3:1-8). All this will happen because of oppression and injustice (3:9-4:1). But the nation will be reborn and cleansed by God's Spirit. He will show his presence at Jerusalem (Chap. 4).

The song about the vineyard (chap.5)

The Lord tended his 'vineyard' (the Jewish nation) but it yielded bitter wild grapes, so he is going to destroy it. The people had created huge farms at the expense of the poor. But 10 acres will produce only 22 litres, and only one tenth of the seed will grow. Pride, luxury and drunkenness will lead to exile. The Lord will whistle for a distant nation (Assyria then Babylon) to invade Judah.

ISAIAH'S VISION AND CALL (chap. 6)

In 740BC, when King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw a vision of God in the temple. The seraphim worshipped him and the building shook at their voices. Isaiah expected to be struck dead because he had seen God. But a seraph touched his lips with a coal and pronounced him cleansed. The Lord asked who would go to prophesy. Isaiah said he would. He was to tell the nation that they were blind and deaf. They would be destroyed, but a remnant ('stump') would survive. Verses 9-10 show the typical Hebrew idea of describing a result as if it were a purpose. God's purpose was that they should hear. But the result of Isaiah's prophecy would be that they wouldn't.

THE COMING JUDGMENT AND THE COMING KING (Chaps. 7-12)

King Ahaz warned of the threat from the north (chaps. 7-8)

In 735BC, because Ahaz had defied God, Judah was attacked by Israel ("Ephraim") and Syria for refusing to join them against Assyria. Isaiah goes with his son Shearjashub (which means "a remnant will return") to Ahaz telling him not to take any notice of the attack. Isaiah prophesies that a young woman will conceive and bear a son called Immanuel ("God with us") and in the time it takes a child to reach the age to choose for himself, Israel and Syria will be destroyed. But Ahaz turned to Assyria

for help. So Isaiah prophesied that Egypt and Assyria would clash in Judah and the land will be punished.

The Lord told Isaiah to call his next son Maher-shalal-hash-baz ('speed, spoil, hasten, plunder') saying that before the child could talk, Assyria would conquer Israel and Syria. The names of his children are therefore prophetic. There is no need to fall into the evil of consulting mediums. Great darkness is coming.

The prince of peace (chap. 9:1-7)

But in the future Zebulun and Naphtali in Galilee (the first to be destroyed by Assyria) will see the light and rejoice in their liberation. For a child is to be born and to live in Nazareth of Galilee. He will be "wonderful, counsellor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace." He will reign forever over the Jewish nation in justice.

Israel warned of Judgment (chap. 9:8-10:4)

Israel broke away from Judah to form a northern kingdom. They are condemned for their arrogance, impenitence and injustice against the poor.

Assyria attacks Syria and Israel (chap. 10:5-34)

Although God is using Assyria to punish the nations, he will also punish with disease their cruelty and their pride in thinking they achieved the victory by their own strength. A small remnant of God's people will survive.

The coming king (chaps. 11-12)

A shoot will come from the 'stump' of Jesse (i.e. David's family). He will have the Holy Spirit who will give him wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and the fear of God. He will judge fairly and bring world peace. A second time God will gather the remnant from all over the world. Their enemies will be punished. A psalm of praise follows in Chapter 12.

THE WARNING OF JUDGMENT ON THE NATIONS (chaps. 13 -23)

Babylon (13:1-14:23)

In Isaiah's day Babylon was seeking independence from Assyria. Isaiah looks 100 years ahead when Babylon would conquer Assyria and would itself later be conquered by the Medes and Persians under Cyrus in 539BC. Babylon would be an uninhabited wasteland (13:20-22) as it became in the 4th century BC. Chapter 14 contains a song taunting the King of Babylon in his pride. "All the kings of the nations lie in state, each in his own tomb" (14:18).

Assyria (14:24-27)

Ultimately Babylon will conquer Assyria, but firstly there will be a defeat in God's land (Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem - see chapters 36-37)

Philistia (14:28-32)

Assyria has problems and the Philistines seek Judah's help to rebel. But Assyria will punish the Philistines.

Moab (15-16)

The Moabites were descended from Lot. Also Ruth was a Moabitess. But they did not share Israel's faith. Isaiah sympathizes with Moab's suffering. In three years Assyria will conquer them. Moab seeks help from Jerusalem and God encourages such help.

Damascus (Syria) (chap. 17)

Israel is condemned for siding with Judah against Assyria. Judah would not join them and appealed to

Assyria who attacked Syria.

Ethiopia (Cush) (chap. 18)

This is Sudan. In those days an 'Ethiopian' line of kings ruled Egypt. They send envoys because of the Assyrian threat. Isaiah foretells that Assyria will be defeated (see 37:36-38).

Egypt (chap. 19)

Egypt will suffer civil strife and then conquest, economic disaster, and the breakdown of leadership. Assyria defeated Egypt in 701 and plundered temple treasures in 633BC at Thebes. But ultimately, God plans the conversion of Egypt "in that day" - the day of the Lord, i.e. the day of Christ's return. Egypt, Assyria and Israel will be linked.

Egypt and Ethiopia (chap. 20)

In 711BC Sargon of Assyria put down the Philistine revolt at Ashdod. Egyptian help had not materialised. God calls Isaiah to go about wearing only a loin cloth, i.e. appearing as a slave. This was an acted prophecy warning of the approaching captivity of the Egyptians and discouraging the Jews from relying on them. The Assyrians defeated Egypt in 701BC.

Babylon, Edom, Arabia (chap. 21)

The downfall of Babylon ("the desert by the sea") is foretold. Good though this is for the Jews, Isaiah is appalled by the vision. Edom (Dumah) will be free temporarily but judgement will come. Even the remote tribes of Arabia will be taken by Assyria. Sargon attacked Arabia in 715BC.

Jerusalem (chap. 22)

Jerusalem is called "the valley of vision" - it is surrounded by hills and valleys. In Hezekiah's reign judgement was averted but Isaiah sees the ultimate destruction of the walls and temple. (This happened after a siege in 587 BC). He saw the people reacting in panic (v. 8-12) and escapism (v. 13). But back in the present, Isaiah is told to go to Shebna, a high official in Hezekiah's court, and to announce that he will be demoted. Eliakim will take over but will not cope for long with the demands of those around him.

Tyre (chap. 23)

This is now Sour in Lebanon. It was for centuries an important sea port with colonies such as Cyprus. Her ships reached the Indian Ocean and English Channel. One important trade was in Egyptian grain (see v. 3). Isaiah foresaw the defeat of Tyre. It eventually happened in 722BC when Sargon of Assyria attacked. In 701 the ruler of Tyre fled to Cyprus from Sennacherib. When Assyria declined, Tyre recovered, only to be conquered by Babylon.

THE LAST JUDGMENT (chaps. 24-27)

One day the earth will be laid waste. Its surface will be twisted and inhabitants scattered. Few will survive. The earth will be shaken, the host of heaven (supernatural powers) will be punished. The sun and moon will be affected (chap. 24).

However, victory will be achieved by God. The needy will be protected. He will gather all peoples to feast on Mt. Zion. Death, suffering and shame will be removed from his people (chap. 25). The song of his people in that day will affirm "You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you. Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD, the LORD himself, is the Rock eternal" (26: 3-4). There will be patient waiting (26:8-9) suffering and failure (25:16-18). But God keeps his people even through death (26:19). Then Isaiah sings of the restoration of Israel. (Chap 27). It will be a fruitful vineyard. The punishment will purge it of idolatry. He will gather his people from far afield to worship in Jerusalem.

WARNING OF JUDGMENT ON ISRAEL (Chaps 28-31)

The proud pleasure-seeking drunkards of the northern kingdom are ripe for Assyrian invasion. But a

small remnant will survive (28:5). The rulers of Jerusalem scoff and deliberately make nonsense of God's message (28:9-10). But God is going to give his next message in Assyrian (28:11)! They are so over-confident they feel they have a covenant with death. They are about to discover how wrong they are. Just as the farmer knows what methods to use for growing crops, so God also knows what he is doing with his people. God's message to 'Ariel' (Jerusalem) is that it will be besieged, then relieved for a time. (This happened when Sennacherib besieged the city but plague caused him to withdraw). But God's word is a 'closed book' to this people because they only pay lip service. One day he will open their eyes and ears and "the humble will rejoice in the LORD" (29:19).

The reaction of trusting in Egypt's help against Assyria is condemned (chap. 30). When the invasion comes to Judah, Egypt will not get involved. And yet the Jews refuse to heed God's prophetic word. "This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: 'In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it'" (30:15). The message is that "the LORD longs to be gracious to you" (30:18) but the people ignored this. He would guide them, bless them and heal them. Assyria would be utterly destroyed. But the people trusted in Egypt, not the Lord.

PROMISE OF GLORY TO COME (chaps 32-35)

The coming king (chap. 32)

He will reign in justice and righteousness (vv. 1-8). Isaiah then challenges the 'ladies of leisure' in Jerusalem who are typical of the complacent people who face judgement (v. 9-14). But in the future the Spirit will be poured out bringing justice, righteousness and peace.

Judgment on the destroyer (chap. 33)

The destroyer is not named. But those who pray for God's protection will remain secure. Relying on human beings is doomed to failure. God will never desert those who trust him. He will defend them and give them stability, prosperity and security.

Judgment on the nations (chap. 34)

God will punish the nations who have wronged his people. Edom is typical and will be utterly destroyed.

Deliverance for God's people (chap. 35)

The desert will be transformed into a paradise of beautiful flowers, graceful trees and flowing streams. God will vindicate, strengthen and encourage his people. He will bring his ransomed people home along a safe road. They will be singing with joy and gladness.

HEZEKIAH'S REIGN (Chaps 36-39)

The Assyrians besieged Jerusalem but withdrew because of plague. Messengers from Babylon were foolishly shown the temple treasures by Hezekiah.

THE VISION OF FREEDOM (chaps 40-48)

The message of comfort (chaps. 40-41)

God comforts his people that the danger from Assyria is over and that the penalty for their sins is paid. The way of the Lord is to be prepared in the wilderness (John the Baptist ultimately fulfilled this). God is eternal even though man is here only for a short time. God is coming as a good shepherd to carry his lambs. He is the mighty creator. His wisdom is infinite. The nations are tiny by comparison. God laughs at their arrogance. He strengthens his people. Contrast this with the home-made idol!

God calls the nations to say who is sovereign over the invaders (chap. 41). He promises to strengthen, help and uphold his chosen people. He will utterly defeat their foes. He will provide for all his people's needs. Idols cannot foretell the future. But God is bringing Cyrus from the north (and the east) and he will defeat Babylon after Babylon has conquered God's people. So they will be released.

A light to the nations (chap. 42)

Here begins the first of the 'servant songs' in Isaiah (others being in 49:1-13; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12 and 61:1-4). To begin with, God's servant was seen as Israel or the faithful remnant of Israel. But gradually it dawned that the servant would be one individual who would die to save mankind. Here the servant is anointed by the Spirit to bring forth justice. The servant is to be a light to the nations to open blind eyes and release prisoners. Through the servant God will bless righteous and punish idolaters. Israel failed to be such a servant but Jesus didn't.

God's care for Israel and the return from exile promised (chaps 43-45)

God expresses his great love through Isaiah to Israel. He created them, called them to be his people and redeemed them. He will protect them in potentially overwhelming circumstances. He will punish the surrounding nations in order to deliver Israel. He will bring them from all directions - from the ends of the earth. (This is only now being completely fulfilled. The first return was from Babylon - the east and north. Now there is a worldwide return). God is the only God. He will break Babylon's power. Yet Israel doesn't deserve this. "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more" (43:25). God will pour out His spirit on Israel in the future. Idols are made from firewood - they are mere rubbish. (44:9-20). God is Israel's redeemer. Isaiah foretells that Cyrus will set Israel free (Cyrus, the Persian, conquered Babylon in 539 BC and let the Jews return under Zerubbabel a year later). Israel has no more right to resent God using a pagan saviour than a pot has to argue with the potter (45:9-13). But salvation is also offered to the whole world (45:22-23). This is pointing, of course, to Christ.

Babylon's downfall prophesied (chaps. 46-47)

The Babylonian 'gods' Bel and Nebo will bow down and submit to the Lord's judgment (when Babylon falls). Dumb idols burden their worshippers when they carry their 'gods.' But God bears the burden of his people. Chap. 47 is a taunt-song against Babylon. Babylon will be like a young woman who is very proud and arrogant but is publicly degraded and shamed.

God's patience over his rebellious people (chap. 48)

Israel has been hypocritical, idolatrous, treacherous and rebellious. But God has spared them because they are his chosen people. If only, though, they had obeyed him. Then their peace would have been like a river. But there is no peace for the wicked.

THE SERVANT WHO IS A SAVIOUR (Chaps. 49-55)

The word 'servant' sometimes refers to Israel and sometimes to Christ (NB. This is centuries before Christ).

The servant's mission to Israel (chaps. 49-50)

The servant is to "raise up" Israel. He will be a light to the nations, bringing salvation to the world. A mother may forget her baby but God won't forget Israel. He has engraved Israel on the palms of his hands (49:14-16). God did not divorce his unfaithful wife - Israel (50:1). (NB. Hosea was proclaiming this same message to Israel as Isaiah was to Judah). The servant will suffer (offering his back to those who beat him - 50:6) but he will succeed.

Israel set free (chaps. 51-52:12)

God delivered the people of Israel in the exodus and he will deliver them again. They should not fear mortal man but remember their creator. The redeemed will return to Jerusalem with joy and singing. Since release is coming, Israel must shake herself out of gloom, sorrow and apathy. The welcome messenger of good news proclaims God reigns. This means peace, comfort deliverance and salvation for his people (52:7-10).

The suffering servant (chap. 52:13 - 53:12)

The servant will succeed but his appearance would be marred and repulsive. He would be despised,

rejected and misunderstood. Blamed for his own suffering, he would, in fact, be suffering for our sins - our “griefs” (literally “sicknesses”) and sorrows (literally “pains”). He would not complain at his treatment. After his death alongside wicked men he would be buried with a rich man. Yet he was innocent. His death would cause many to be accounted righteous. Here is a vivid and detailed description of the sufferings of Christ centuries before they happened.

Future blessing on Israel and salvation for the world (chaps. 54-55)

The Lord will treat Israel as his wife. For a brief moment he forsook her but he will restore her with great compassion. She will have many children. His love and covenant will be eternal. He is going to build a new “city” (see also “the new Jerusalem” in Revelation 21:10-27) and protect it from attack. The Lord invites anyone who thirsts to come and buy food and drink without cost. Other nations will come to the new Israel. The wicked are invited to come and repent for God will abundantly pardon. His ways and thoughts are far greater than ours. His word is living and active. Israel will enjoy great joy and prosperity. Even nature will be transformed. This, of course, was not completely fulfilled in the first return of the Jews. It moves on to the glorious future God has for Israel still – but only when they turn to Christ (Romans 11:25-27). (See the note at the end of the section on Isaiah 65-66).

ISRAEL’S SIN AND RESTORATION (chaps. 56-66)

Foreigners welcome (chap. 56:1-8)

The Lord welcomes the foreigners who have joined Israel as converts to the Lord. Her leaders are blind and selfish (56:9-12). The righteous are attacked. Religious prostitution and child sacrifice are practised (57:5-8) together with idolatry. They carry on a regular, hypocritical religion - fasting but oppressing the poor, weak and hungry (chap. 58). The nation is full of lies, dishonesty, injustice, hatred and violence (chap. 59:1-15). But God is the high and exalted one who lives forever, whose name is holy. He lives in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit. God “was appalled” that there was no-one to intervene so he intervened himself.

God the redeemer and avenger (chaps. 60-63)

God intervenes, bringing light into the darkness. Many nations will come to Israel’s light, bringing wealth. Her sons will return from far away. Foreigners will help build the land. All her foes will become subservient. There will be no more violence or destruction. They will possess the land forever (chap. 60). Whatever spiritual fulfilment of this there will be, there will also be a literal fulfilment in the future. It is interesting that for the first time many Gentiles are living in Israel voluntarily to help build up the land. Each Kibbutz has its Gentile members. This has never happened before in Israel (see also 61:5). (See the note at the end of the section on Isaiah 65-66)

In chap. 61 the servant speaks the words quoted by Jesus of himself in Luke 4:16-21. The Spirit of the Lord anointed him to bring good tidings to the afflicted, to bind the broken hearted and proclaim liberty to the captives. He will encourage his people to rebuild the nation. They will become a nation of priests (61:6). They will rejoice and praise God (chap.61). The Lord will vindicate Jerusalem and the nations will see this. The Lord will show that he is married to Israel. This should be prayed for earnestly (chap. 62). It has not yet been fulfilled but many Christians believe we are seeing the beginning of it, following the return of Israel to their ancient land after 2000 years. Again it will only be fulfilled when Israel turns to Christ (Romans 11:25-27). (See the note at the end of the section on Isaiah 65-66).

Chap. 63:1-6 tells of a vision of a terrible punishment on Edom which is typical of Israel’s enemies. This must happen in order that Israel might be free. Chaps. 63:12 - 64:12 contain a prayer recalling God’s past deliverances and a prayer for him to deliver them again, having mercy upon them.

God's promise of new heavens and new Earth (Chaps. 65-66)

God is ready to hear the prayers of his people who didn't bother to pray to him. Those who go their own sinful way, refusing to listen to God, will be destroyed. (Fortune and Destiny in 65:11 are pagan

gods of fate). But the righteous will rejoice in long life, prosperity and peace with one another and with nature. God will come to gather all nations to see his glory - from Spain (Tarshish) in the far west, from Africa (Put – Lybia - and Lud) in the south, from Anatolia in the far north (Tubal) and from Greece (Javan). They will bring “all your people” back to Israel (Chap.66:18-21). This is yet to be fulfilled but the recent and current worldwide return of the Jews to Israel is significant here. God is also going to make a new heavens and a new earth (chap.66:22).

NOTE. Some Christians see the return of the Jewish people to their ancient homeland in 1948, after the ultimate manifestation of the evil of anti-Semitism in the Holocaust, as the beginning of a fulfilment of some of the later prophecies in Isaiah. Sadly, this has *sometimes* led to unbalanced views, an *uncritical* support for modern Israel and a neglect of God’s demand that Israel show justice not only to her own people but to others – which includes the Palestinians. For a hopefully balanced view of these matters see my other website <http://www.prayerforpeace.org.uk/index.html> which includes articles entitled “Zionism: Biblical Basis”, “Zionism: Right and Wrong”, “The Call to Justice” and “The Call to Reconciliation.”

JEREMIAH

Jeremiah was born at Anathoth (Anata near Jerusalem) in about 640BC (some 100 years after Isaiah's call and about 50 years after Isaiah died). God called him to be a prophet in 627 BC when Josiah was king of Judah. In that year Ashurbanipal, the last great Assyrian king died. In 621BC the book of the law was discovered and Josiah's reforms took place. Nine years later the Assyrian capital Nineveh fell to the Babylonians. The year 609 saw Egypt advancing to help Assyria. Josiah attacked the Egyptians at Megiddo and was killed. Jehoahaz succeeded him, only to be deposed the same year by the Egyptian Pharaoh Necho in favour of Jehoiakim. Egypt was defeated by Babylon in 605BC at Carchemish and the following year Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered Syria, Philistia and Judah. Jehoiakim later sought an alliance with Egypt and the Babylonians again invaded Judah in 598/597. Jehoiakim died. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians after a two month siege and the new king Jehoiachin was deported to Babylon. His uncle Zedekiah was made king by the Babylonians. But he broke with Babylon, hoping for Egyptian help in 588. After an 18 month siege Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians and the people deported. Three months later Gedaliah the governor was assassinated and Jeremiah was taken to Egypt.

Jeremiah prophesied at the same time as Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Daniel (in the Babylonian court) and Ezekiel (with the exiles in Babylon). He was very unpopular and was imprisoned. His life was threatened and he was called a traitor for advising submission to Babylon. The material in the book is not in date order and is sometimes difficult to link with any particular period in his life.

GOD'S MESSAGE TO JUDAH (chaps. 1-19)

The call of Jeremiah (chap. 1)

Jeremiah was born into a priestly family. God called him to be a prophet when he was probably in his early 20s. Jeremiah protested his inability to speak well and his young age. God assured him he would give him the words and he must not be afraid. He felt God touch his lips and commission him with a sombre message. "I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant" (1:9-10). God used an almond branch to assure Jeremiah "I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled" (1:12 the word "watching" is only one letter different from the word "almond" in Hebrew). He then had a vision of a boiling pot facing to the north. This signified the Babylonians attacking from the north. God warned him that the people of Judah would attack him but he need not fear because God would deliver him.

God's call to Judah to repent (chap 2-4:4)

Israel has been like an unfaithful wife to God. He brought them into the promised land but they forsook him and adopted other 'gods.' They sought help from Egypt and Assyria rather than God. Israel has become like a prostitute or a vine gone wild. They have not heeded God's warnings. In 3:6-10 Jeremiah refers to the northern kingdom who had been exiled back in 722 BC - a hundred years before. God pleads with Judah to repent and return to him. He would forgive them and give them shepherds after his own heart who would teach them wisely. He would write his law on their hearts - they would no longer need the written scrolls in the ark of the covenant. The nations would gather round Jerusalem. Israel and Judah would return from exile and be united.

God's warning of destruction (chap. 4:5-31)

The scorching desert wind symbolises the coming judgement. Disaster will follow disaster. It seems like an undoing of all creation. Yet still Jerusalem beautifies herself for her lovers, i.e seeks foreign aid.

The degradation of Judah (chap. 5)

No-one was just or truthful and the people were unrepentant. Idolatry and adultery were rife. They did not believe God would judge them and they rejected the prophets' message. So the invasion will come. Even then God will not totally destroy the nation "A horrible and shocking thing has happened

in the land: The prophets prophesy lies, the priests rule by their own authority, and my people love it this way. But what will you do in the end?" (5:30-31).

God's declaration of war against Judah (chap 6)

Jerusalem will be besieged. But the people scorned God's warning. The prophets and priests "dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace" (6:14). Their religion is rejected by God. The invader from the north is coming.

Jeremiah prophesies in the temple (chap 7:1-8:3)

God tells Jeremiah to prophesy at the door of the temple telling the people not to trust in an empty ritual. They must turn away from stealing, murder, adultery, lying, idolatry and injustice. They are hypocrites. God forbids Jeremiah to intercede for Judah because her idolatry must be punished (7:16). The bodies of the people will not be buried. Even previously buried people will be disinterred.

The people's false security (chap 8:4-9:26)

"The wise will be put to shame; they will be dismayed and trapped. Since they have rejected the word of the LORD, what kind of wisdom do they have?" (8:9). Jeremiah is sickened and grief-stricken at the sick society around him. There is treachery, lying, deception and oppression. God calls for professional mourners to come to wail at Judah's approaching downfall.

The unfaithfulness of idolatry (chap 10:1-11:17)

Their decorated wooden idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field! "But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King. When he is angry, the earth trembles; the nations cannot endure his wrath" (10:10). The Lord reminds the people through Jeremiah of the covenant made at Sinai which the people had disobeyed, incurring God's judgement.

Jeremiah's life threatened (chap 11:18-12:7)

The people of Anathoth plotted to kill Jeremiah because of his prophecies. He prayed about it and God promised to punish them. Jeremiah questioned God about the problem of evil men prospering. The Lord told him that worse than that was to come (11:5-6) but he will punish the people. He will pluck them up from their land but eventually restore them when they repent.

The loin cloth parable (chap. 13)

The Lord told Jeremiah to buy a loin cloth and wear it. Then he was told to go and hide it at the River Euphrates which was some 350 miles from Jerusalem. Later God told him to retrieve it and the loin cloth was, of course, spoiled. The point of the parable was that like loin cloth clings to the wearer so Israel had a close relationship with God. But because of their rebellion they would be spoiled in exile near the Euphrates (Babylon). Using an illustration of the huge earthen wine jars Jeremiah prophesies that the people will be drunk with the wine of God's wrath. The king and queen mother (Jehoiachin and Nehushta) were warned of exile (13:18-19).

The great drought (chaps 14-15)

The people pray for deliverance from a great drought. But God replies that he will not listen to them. Nor will he accept Jeremiah's excuse for them that they have been deceived by false prophets. Still Jeremiah intercedes for them, however. But God will allow plague, sword, famine and captivity to overtake them because of Manasseh's evil reign. Jeremiah suffers from self-pity so God calls him to return to him and find deliverance.

Jeremiah is forbidden to marry (chap. 16)

This most unusual action showed Judah that judgement was coming and there would be no time to raise a family. Destruction will fall on the rebellious idolaters and law breakers. But, even so God will bring them back from exile out of all the countries where he had driven them" (v.15)

The human heart; Sabbath breaking (chap 17)

The sin of Judah is as indelible as engraving. The person who trusts in human help will fail. "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure" (17:9). At God's command, Jeremiah stands at the Benjamin Gate publicly condemning Sabbath-breaking and pronouncing a blessing if the sabbath was kept.

The potter, the clay and the jug (chap. 18-19:13)

The nations are like clay in God's hand. If God pronounces judgement on a nation which then repents, he will not bring the judgement. Similarly blessing of a nation is conditional on obedience. Plots are made against Jeremiah's life and he prays for his enemies to be severely punished. Then, at God's command, he brought a jug and smashed it in the valley of Hinnom, saying that God will smash the rebellious, idolatrous nation and city.

Jeremiah in the stocks, his message to Zedekiah, Jehoiakim and the leaders (chaps. 19:14-13:40)

Jeremiah returned to the temple and was beaten and put in the stocks by Pashur the priest. The next day, on his release, Jeremiah foretold the exile of Judah and of Pashur in particular. He expressed to God the shame and hurts he received because of his message. But the message was burning within him and he could not be silent. He prayed for punishment on his persecutors and then sank into deep depression - wishing he'd never been born (chap 20). In about 589BC in the final struggle with Babylon, King Zedekiah asked Pashur to ask Jeremiah to give a word from the Lord. Jeremiah foretold the fall of Jerusalem and advised surrender to the Babylonians as the agents of God's judgement (chap 21).

An earlier prophecy follows in chap 22. Jehoiakim reigned from 609-597BC when Jerusalem first surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar and eighteen year old Jehoiachin ("Coniah" v. 24) was exiled. Jeremiah called for justice and obedience. Jehoiakim, unlike his god-fearing father Josiah, would be punished for his injustice, oppression and materialism.

The false shepherds of Judah would be replaced by faithful men. The Lord will raise up a righteous branch who will bring justice and righteousness. Judah will be saved and Israel secure. He will bring his people back from exile in the nations. The false prophets were roundly condemned and should be ignored.

The baskets of figs; Nebuchadnezzar's invasion foretold (chaps 24-25)

In 597BC Nebuchadnezzar had taken Jehoiachin ("Jeconiah") and many leaders and craftsmen into exile. Jeremiah had a vision of two baskets of figs - one good, representing those who had been exiled - the other bad, representing those who remain - Judah. God will bless the former and judge the latter: for it is now his will that Judah should be exiled (chap 24).

In 605BC Nebuchadnezzar had defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish. Jeremiah reminded the people that he had prophesied God's message of repentance for 23 years and they had not received it. So Nebuchadnezzar will invade and lay waste the land, exiling the people for seventy years (25:8-11). Then Babylon will be punished and all Jeremiah prophesied against the nations will happen.

Jeremiah saved from execution in Jehoiakim's reign (chap. 26)

Back in the reign of Jehoiakim (about 609BC) the Lord (as in Chap 7) commanded Jeremiah to "speak to all the people of the towns of Judah who come to worship in the house of the LORD. Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word" (26:2). God said they might listen but if not he would destroy the temple and the city. At this the priests, prophets and people seized him and asked the rulers to execute him. Jeremiah stated that his message is from God and so his execution would only add to their sins and the coming judgement. The rulers said Jeremiah didn't deserve death anymore than Micah did in Hezekiah's reign a century before. However a prophet called Uriah was murdered by Jehoiakim.

Jeremiah's yoke; Hananiah's false prophecy and death (chap. 27-28)

This chapter is set in Zedekiah's reign - 597BC. He had been put on the throne by the Babylonians who had taken the first lot of captives from Jerusalem. But rebellion was brewing in Judah. So God told Jeremiah to walk the streets in a wooden yoke. This symbolised that God had put Judah and the surrounding nations under Nebuchadnezzar's yoke. If they didn't submit God would punish them further. There were many false prophets like Hananiah who contradicted Jeremiah. Hananiah said Nebuchadnezzar would have to release King Jehoiachin ("Jeconiah") and the temple treasures. To symbolise this Hananiah broke Jeremiah's yoke. God told Jeremiah to tell Hananiah that the wooden yoke would therefore be replaced by a harder iron one. He told Hananiah that God would punish him. Two months later Hananiah died.

Jeremiah writes to the exiles (chap. 29)

He said that the exile would last 70 years so they would be wise to settle in and live as normally as possible. "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (29:11-13). Jeremiah condemned the false prophets in Babylon and said that judgement will fall on Judah - so there will be no quick return. He also condemned those in Babylon who wrote to Jerusalem trying to stir up opposition to Jeremiah.

The new covenant is promised (chap. 30-31)

God will restore the nation's fortunes and set them free to serve God. He will heal their wounds. He said, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness" (31:3). He will then make a new covenant with the people "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (31:33-34) (This was obviously fulfilled in Christ. Jeremiah 'telescopes' the return from exile into the coming of the messiah).

Jeremiah buys land anticipating the return; the messiah foretold (chaps. 32-33)

In 588/7BC Jerusalem was besieged by Nebuchadnezzar and Jeremiah's home town - Anathoth - was occupied by the enemy. His cousin Hanamel offered some family land for Jeremiah to buy. Although a foolish action economically in those circumstances Jeremiah obeyed God's prompting to buy it. The reason was to show that the exiles would return one day to rebuild the land. He then praised God who had led Israel in the past but expressed that he was puzzled as to why God had asked him to buy the land, God explains why, and foretells the return from exile. "I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them" (32:40). "In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. 'David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of Israel'" (nor a priest to offer sacrifice) (33:15-18).

The law on slaves broken in Judah (chap. 34)

Jeremiah foretells that Zedekiah will die in peace. Zedekiah orders that, in accordance with the law, all Jewish slaves must be set free (Deuteronomy 15:12). However the slave owners, after obeying, quietly took the slaves into captivity again. Jeremiah prophesies their downfall for this.

The faithfulness of the Rechabites (chap. 35)

Jeremiah is led to the Rechabites - a bedouin tribe seeking refuge in Jerusalem. They are the descendants of Jehonadab (or Jonedab) the son of Rechab who opposed the Baal worshippers in 2 Kings 10:15-23. They had kept Jehonadab's rule to avoid wine and to live a nomad existence. This contrasts with Judah's disobedience as Jeremiah tells the people.

Jeremiah's scroll burnt by Jehoiakin (chap. 36)

The Lord commanded Jeremiah to write down all his prophecies on a scroll, and his secretary Baruch

was to read it out in the temple. (Jeremiah was banned from the temple). The princes heard about it and summoned Baruch. The words of the scroll made them afraid and they warned Baruch and Jeremiah to hide whilst they told the king. Jehoiakim, however, cut the scroll up and burnt it piece by piece. Jeremiah prophesied he would be punished and set about writing a replacement scroll.

Jeremiah in prison (chap. 37-38)

In Zedekiah's reign (588 BC) Jeremiah advised that Judah should surrender to Babylon, because it was God's plan to punish Judah. The Babylonians withdrew from Jerusalem as they heard the Egyptians were advancing. Jeremiah took the opportunity to go to inspect the land he had bought (chap. 32). The sentry at the gate mistook this action for Jeremiah deserting to join the Babylonians. So he was beaten and imprisoned. Later Zedekiah secretly consulted him for a word from the Lord. Jeremiah said defeat would come, but asked the king to remove him from his present prison where he would die, for it was a cistern under a house and very insanitary. So Jeremiah was removed to the palace prison and given greater freedom and more food. However some powerful leaders demanded that Jeremiah be executed. Zedekiah agreed and they imprisoned Jeremiah in another cistern - letting him down by rope. He sank in the mud. When Ebed-melech, an Ethiopian eunuch in the king's house, heard this he told Zedekiah. So Ebed-melech with helpers drew Jeremiah up using a rope of old rags. He returned to the palace prison. Again Zedekiah secretly consulted Jeremiah. The prophet made the king promise not to execute him then told him he must surrender to Babylon, and assured him the king and the royal household and Jerusalem would thereby be safe.

The fall of Jerusalem, The death of Gedaliah (chaps. 39-41)

In July 587 BC after an 18 months siege Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar. Zedekiah did not surrender but fled and was captured. His sons were killed, he was deliberately blinded, the leaders were executed and Jerusalem destroyed. However Nebuchadnezzar protected Jeremiah. He was released from captivity and given the choice of a good position in Babylon or the freedom to remain in Judah under the care of Gedaliah. Jeremiah chose the latter. Gedaliah was appointed governor of Judah and encouraged the people to return to normal life. He was warned that the king of the Ammonites had sent someone to assassinate him but would not believe it. After three months he and those around him were assassinated. The assassins killed many other people but they were defeated eventually by the Jewish leaders.

The disobedient escape to Egypt (chaps. 42-43)

The Jewish leaders intended to escape to Egypt for fear of Babylonian reprisals for the death of Gedaliah. They consulted Jeremiah who gave the word of the Lord that they should stay in Judah and he would protect them. To go to Egypt would mean destruction for them all. Although they had promised to obey the Lord, the people accused Jeremiah of lying. The leaders gathered all the people, including Jeremiah, and went down into Egypt. On their arrival Jeremiah took large stones and hid them in the mortar of the pavement leading into Pharaoh's palace. He predicted that the Babylonians would conquer Egypt and set up their throne at the place where the stones were hidden. In 568 BC Nebuchadnezzar did conquer Egypt and there were Jews amongst the people he captured,

Jeremiah's final plea (chap. 44)

Jeremiah prophesied that God had judged Judah for persistent disobedience. Why were they adding this further evil of not remaining in Judah to wait for the return from Babylonian exile? Because they had fled to Egypt God would judge them. But the people rejected this word and said they would worship the "queen of heaven" who would care for them. Jeremiah then repeated that God would allow them to be destroyed. We hear no more of Jeremiah after this. There is a tradition that he was stoned to death in Egypt.

(Chap. 45 related to chap. 36 when Baruch wrote the scroll for Jeremiah in 605BC. Baruch was very distressed about the national situation. The Lord told him that all he had built would be broken down but Baruch would be saved.)

Prophecies against the nations (chap. 46-51)

Egypt (46:1-26) Jeremiah poetically described the defeat of the Egyptians by Nebuchadnezzar at Carchemish in 605BC. He foretold that Nebuchadnezzar would again defeat Egypt (this happened in 568 BC).

Comfort for Israel (46:27-28) This beautiful passage speaks of Israel being restored.

Philistia (47) Again Jeremiah poetically spoke of the destruction of Philistia by the Babylonians which must have happened when Jerusalem fell in 587BC.

Moab (48) Moab will be destroyed but will be restored ultimately. Its condemnation includes includes the words “A curse on anyone who is lax in doing the LORD’s work!” (48:10).

Ammon (49:1-6) They stole Israelite land and would be driven out but restored ultimately.

Edom (49:7-22) Edom will be totally destroyed. Obadiah says very similar things to Edom.

Damascus (49:23-27)

Kedar (49:28-33) These nomadic tribes were taken by Nebuchadnezzar in 599BC.

Elam (49:34-39) Jeremiah spoke in 597 BC and within a year Babylon attacked Elam. But it would be restored.

Babylon (50-51) Babylon will be destroyed and the Jews restored. Babylon ultimately fell to Cyrus the Mede in October 539BC. Babylon would not let the captives go but those who would conquer Babylon would also free the Jews. Cyrus did this. Jeremiah’s great prophecy was sent to Babylon in the fourth year of Zedekiah, six years before the fall of Jerusalem. It was given a public reading in Babylon and then sunk in the river Euphrates as a sign that Babylon itself would sink before her enemies.

The Fall of Jerusalem (chap. 52) See 2 Kings 24-25.

LAMENTATIONS

These laments are said to be by Jeremiah but they are anonymous in the Hebrew text. They differ from Jeremiah's style and content but they were at least written by a contemporary of his who saw the fall of Jerusalem. The first four poems are dirges. Each of the 22 verses begins with a new letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Chap. 3 has three verses to each letter. The fifth poem is not a dirge and doesn't have the letters in an acrostic. The book is read aloud in Jewish synagogues in mid-July to mark the destruction of the temple in both 587BC and 70AD.

The first lament (chap. 1)

Jerusalem is bereft and deserted. The people are deported. The glory has gone. Her enemies have triumphed because of her sins. The temple is defiled "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look around and see. Is any suffering like my suffering that was inflicted on me, that the LORD brought on me in the day of his fierce anger?" (v.12) "The LORD is righteous, yet I rebelled against his command" (v. 18) "See, LORD, how distressed I am! I am in torment within, and in my heart I am disturbed, for I have been most rebellious" (v.20)

The second lament (chap 2)

The Lord has rejected king and priest. He has disowned his sanctuary. The prophets obtain no vision from the Lord. "The visions of your prophets were false and worthless; they did not expose your sin to ward off your captivity" (v. 14). Enemies mock. Children starve. Many have been slaughtered.

The third lament (chap. 3)

One man's experience is typical. He is mentally and physically wrecked. He is mocked and resents the provocation of his enemies. But still he hopes in God. "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone" (vv. 22-33).

The fourth lament (chap. 4)

There are bitter memories of the siege. Children starving, shrivelled bodies, cannibalism. Jerusalem, 'the impregnable', fell and the people were exiled. Edom mocks, unaware of its own coming destruction.

The fifth lament (chap. 5)

The writer asks God to remember the disgrace of exile, the orphans, the poor exhausted people, the forced labour, the rape, cruelty and murder, the desolation. "You, LORD, reign forever; your throne endures from generation to generation. Why do you always forget us? Why do you forsake us so long? Restore us to yourself, LORD, that we may return; renew our days as of old" (vv. 19, 21).

EZEKIEL

In 597BC Ezekiel, a young trainee priest in his mid 20's, was exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon after King Jehoiachin surrendered Jerusalem. Five years later God called him to be a prophet, giving him an awe inspiring vision of his majesty. Against God's glory the people's sin was black and demanded judgment. Only six years later when Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 BC did he mention the future restoration of Israel. Ezekiel regarded himself as a 'look-out' with great responsibility. He stresses individual responsibility. Ezekiel's style is vivid and visual - called 'apocalyptic' - and is similar to the Book of Revelation (The 'Apocalypse').

Ezekiel's vision of God (chap. 1)

Ezekiel was alone on a sandy plain. Suddenly, to the north, he saw what seemed to be a dark storm cloud, black and threatening but with a silver lining and continual lightning. Then he saw four angelic creatures (cherubs). They were grotesque, having human and animal characteristics. Each had four faces - that of a man (supreme in creation), of a lion (king of wild beasts), of an ox (king of domestic animals) and of an eagle (king of birds). The creatures formed a square, standing facing each other with their human faces outwards and touching wing tips. Hence, any observer would see a different face on each creature and all four faces were visible at any time from any angle. They had also human hands, calves feet and straight legs. Of their wings, only two touched the wings of their neighbours. In the centre of the square a fire glowed. It symbolised God's judgment and flashed forth lightning periodically. They moved very quickly in formation. Beside each creature was a terrifying whirling wheel made of yellow jasper stone or topaz. The wheels probably consisted of two vertical discs bisecting one another at right angles, so they acted as a kind of castor - moving in any direction. But the rims of the wheels were full of eyes. The whole chariot throne could either move easily over the ground or fly. The four creatures supported on their wing tips a platform gleaming like ice. As they moved, the wings vibrated powerfully making a noise like a mountain torrent or rolling thunder or an army marching. The voice of God is heard. Ezekiel looked up above the platform to see a sapphire throne. He saw on the throne a human form but could only describe God as like fire surrounded by a rainbow. Ezekiel fell on his face.

Ezekiel's call (chaps. 2-3)

God addressed Ezekiel as "Son of man" (which simply means 'human being'). The Holy Spirit raised him to his feet and God called him to go to the people of Israel - "a rebellious nation ... obstinate and stubborn" (2:3-4). He is to prophesy to them without fear. Even if they don't listen they will recognize he is a prophet. God gave him a scroll written on both sides. (This is unusual. Maybe it meant there was no room for Ezekiel to add his own ideas). The contents spelt out judgment and Ezekiel had to eat the scroll which tasted like honey. Then he felt lifted up by the Holy Spirit as the glory of the Lord rose up with the sound of an earthquake. Ezekiel returned to civilisation but for a week was overwhelmed with horror and wonder at what he had seen. Then the Lord spoke again, telling him he was a watchman. If he warned people and they ignored him, he was innocent of their blood. If he didn't warn them he would be responsible for their fate. Again out on the plain, he had a vision of God who said he must restrain himself and be dumb except for when God wanted him to prophesy. This dumbness lasted until he heard the news of the fall of Jerusalem (chap. 24:27).

Prophecies of God's judgment on Israel (chaps. 4-24)

The siege and fall of Jerusalem (chaps. 4-5)

Ezekiel took a large brick and drew a picture of Jerusalem on it. He set up a mound and model camps, siegeworks and battering rams. He pressed the siege against 'Jerusalem' with an iron baking plate. So Ezekiel was acting the part of God. Each day for 390 days he spent part of the day lying on his left side facing the brick, his arm bared picturing readiness for severe action. He bound his body with ropes. The 390 days refers to the number of years of Israel's punishment. Then he did a further 40

days on his right side, symbolising the number of years of Judah's punishment. During this time he dieted on 8 ounces of bread baked from mixed grain (showing the need to scrape together any available grains in a siege) and a pint of water. He was revolted at the idea of baking the bread over a fire of human excrement and so was allowed to use cow dung instead. Then he shaved his head and weighed his hair. A third he burnt in the 'city' (i.e. meaning a third of the people of Jerusalem would die in the city), a third he chopped up around the 'city' (meaning a third would be killed fighting outside the city) and a third was thrown to the wind (a third would be exiled). He retrieved a few hairs from the latter and tucked them in his robe. But even some of those were burnt. In the siege there will be cannibalism,

Israel is doomed (chaps. 6-7)

The idolatrous altars will be destroyed and many will die in war and pestilence.

Vision of Jerusalem's punishment (chaps. 8-11)

In September 592 BC Ezekiel had a vision of Jerusalem. In the temple was the image of the Canaanite goddess Asherah or Astarte (the "the idol that provokes to jealousy" 8:3). The people were practising animal worship, thinking the Lord would not see them. Others were worshipping the Sun. But God does see them and will judge them severely. His executioners were waiting. Those who mourned over the abominations were marked on their foreheads so that they would be spared. The others were executed, to Ezekiel's horror. He then saw a repeat of the first version of the cherubim, wheels and throne. The man who had marked the foreheads was told to take live coals from the midst of the cherubim and to scatter them over the city. Then the glory of the Lord filled the temple with cloud and brightness and the sound of the cherubims' wings. After this, Ezekiel was shown Ja-azaniah and Pelatiah, two rulers of Israel who were recommending resistance to Babylon. The prophets were saying this would be fatal. Ezekiel obeyed God and prophesied against the two rulers. Pelatiah fell dead. But God assured Ezekiel that he will not totally destroy the people of Israel. He will preserve a remnant and give them a new heart and spirit to obey him. Then Ezekiel returned in the vision to Babylon. The vision ended and Ezekiel recounted it to the exiles,

Ezekiel acts as an exile (chap. 12)

In obedience to God, Ezekiel, during daylight, collected bare essentials for his long journey into exile. Then in the evening he dug through the mud wall of his house as though escaping by stealth. He carried a bundle and covered his face either as a disguise or to represent blindness. He was, in fact, acting as King Zedekiah who was blinded by the Babylonians and exiled. Ezekiel ate his food with a display of fear. The Lord emphasizes that the vision given to Ezekiel was not false nor would it be delayed long.

False prophets and idolatry (chaps. 13-14)

They prophesied out of their own minds, saying what people wanted to hear. They therefore stand condemned. They are like plaster concealing a crumbling nation. There were prophetesses practising magic. Idolatry is roundly condemned by the Lord

The parable of the vine (chap. 15)

Israel is typically like a vine. At present it was bearing no fruit. Nor was it any use as wood. It was only useful to be burnt. This symbolizes Jerusalem's fate.

Jerusalem as an unfaithful wife (chap. 16)

God chose Israel when she was nothing but an abandoned waif. He lavished his love on her and she owed him everything. She was beautiful but prostituted herself with foreigners and became rich on immoral earnings. She worshipped false gods. The covenant (marriage-vow) with the Lord was broken and forgotten. Therefore the Lord will punish her severely but will, even then, ultimately restore her, establishing an everlasting covenant with her.

The eagles attack the vine (chap. 17)

Ezekiel told an allegory. A richly-plumed eagle came to Lebanon and plucked off a topmost cedar twig. This represents Nebuchadnezzar who exiled King Jehoiachin. The eagle then took a seed of the land and set it. The seed grew to a low-spreading vine bending towards the first eagle. Then it bent towards a second eagle. (The seed is Zedekiah and the second eagle Egypt to whom he looked for help against Babylon.) But the Babylonians then came and destroyed Jerusalem. Three or four years after Ezekiel prophesied this, Jerusalem was destroyed (587BC). But the Lord will plant a cutting from the cedar tree (Israel's line of kings) and preserve it. This refers to the kingdom of Christ which will overcome all world powers.

Individual responsibility to God (chap. 18)

The idea of corporate responsibility - the sins of the fathers being visited on the children - is here given a necessary balance. It led sometimes to fatalism and people blaming earlier generations for their problems. But Ezekiel says the *present* generation are guilty - more so than their fathers. A man will be punished for his own sins but forgiven if he repents. God wants repentance, not condemnation.

A dirge for the rulers of Israel (chap. 19)

Judah, the "Lioness" had one "cub" Jehoahaz who was exiled to Egypt by Pharaoh Necho in 609BC. The second "cub" Jehoiachin surrendered to Babylon in 597BC and was exiled. The vine of Judah will be plucked up, planted (exiled) in the desert and destroyed, because of Zedekiah's rebellion.

The history of Israel's rebellion and its judgment (chaps. 20-22)

In July/August 591BC Ezekiel is told by God to tell the nation of its rebellious history. God chose them and promised to bring them from Egypt into the promised land, so long as they put away idolatry. They disobeyed. Rather than punish them in Egypt, he led them out and gave them the law at Sinai. They disobeyed. Rather than destroy them utterly, he let them wander in the wilderness until the generation had all died. He commanded their children not to repeat their fathers' sins. They disobeyed. Rather than destroy them, he threatened to send them into exile amongst the nations. He gave them up to their man-made, evil laws and customs (20:25-26). But when they entered the promised land they readily committed idolatry. Still they wanted to live like pagans. But God would perform another Exodus - from exile. They would be judged again in the wilderness. He will purge out rebellion. A purified remnant will worship God in Jerusalem. Their repentance will tell of God's holiness.

In the meantime, judgment will come like a forest fire in the Negev (now a desert - then a forest). God's sword will be exercised by Babylon in judgment on Jerusalem and the capital of Ammon (the latter fell five years after Jerusalem). The 'road' from Babylon divides to reach Jerusalem and Ammon. Both are 'sign-posted' at the fork (21:19-20). Jerusalem is guilty of bloodshed, violence, immorality and extortion. Their so-called religion has made a mockery of God. They are dross. The furnace will prove they are not genuine metal.

The parable of the two sisters (chap. 25)

The two sisters are Oholah (Samaria, capital of the northern kingdom of Israel) and Oholibah (Jerusalem, capital of Judah). They both prostituted themselves with pagan gods of Assyria and Egypt. Oholah (Samaria) was therefore delivered into the hands of Assyria (722BC). Oholibah (Jerusalem) saw this happen but continued to be more corrupt than her sister. She will therefore suffer the same fate from Babylon.

The siege of Jerusalem (chap. 24)

On (probably) 15th January 588BC Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem. The city is like a rusty cooking pot. After the cooking is finished the pot was left empty on the fire to melt. On the same day Ezekiel's wife died suddenly, but the Lord would not allow him to mourn openly. This is used as a prophetic sign that men will suffer a deep inner grief for the destruction of Jerusalem. They will be too

stunned to weep. When the news of Jerusalem's fall arrives, Ezekiel will be free to speak more positively - the judgment will be over.

Prophecies of God's judgment on foreign nations (chaps. 25-32)

Ammon rejoiced at Israel's fate, Moab scoffed, Edom and Philistia took revenge against her. They would therefore be laid waste (chap. 25). The first three were soon conquered by the Nabataean tribes and Philistia eventually disappeared. Tyre hoped to gain from Israel's downfall, but Ezekiel prophesied Nebuchadnezzar's 13 year siege which began a few months later. All its fabulous wealth, its double harbour, its glass and purple dye industry will be laid waste, like a large merchant ship it will be wrecked and the world would mourn (chaps. 26-27). The King of Tyre is condemned for his pride with language taken from Genesis 2-3. He is paralleled with Adam who was created a wonderful being but through pride was driven out of Eden (chap.28:11-19). Sidon (20 miles north of Tyre) treated Israel with contempt. It fell to Nebuchadnezzar (chap.28:20-26).

Then there are seven prophecies against Egypt.

- i. 29:1-16 January 587BC. Egypt will be punished because Pharaoh claimed to be God. He will learn who God really is!
- ii. 29:17-21 New year's day 571BC. After the fall of Tyre (574BC) Egypt was next in line for conquest by Babylon.
- iii. 30:1-19. Nebuchadnezzar will destroy Egypt and her allies. The wealth and 'gods' of Egypt will be destroyed too.
- iv. 30:20-26. April 587BC. The Egyptian army had halfheartedly tried to relieve Jerusalem. It had been defeated but worse defeat was to follow.
- v. 31:1-18 June 587BC. Egypt is like a proud cedar tree. It will be felled and removed to Sheol (the Place of the Dead).
- vi. 32:1-16 March 585BC. Jerusalem had fallen. The fall of Pharaoh would be horrifying to surrounding nations.
- vii. 32:17-32 March(?) 585BC. Egypt will be buried with Assyria, Elam (S.W.Iran) Meshech (people who entered the Near East from Russia, Edom - Jordan, Sidon - Lebanon).

THE RESTORATION OF ISRAEL (chaps. 53-48)

The promise of the good shepherd (chaps. 33-35)

Ezekiel was reminded of his duty as watchman (33:1-20 see 3:17-21; 18:5-29). News arrived that Jerusalem had fallen. Ezekiel had sensed this before the messenger came. Yet the Lord told him that the people left in Judah, far from repenting, were busy claiming their neighbours' property. Furthermore, the exiles listening to Ezekiel are treating his words as entertainment rather than acting upon them (33:21-33). God denounces the 'shepherds' (rulers) of Israel who have been selfish and greedy - exploiting the 'sheep' (people) rather than caring for them. So God will, like a true shepherd, bring them home. He will appoint a new shepherd, a new 'David' (John 10:11) and they will dwell securely in the land, enjoying God's blessing (chap. 34). Edom is again condemned (chap. 35).

The return from exile (chap. 36)

Surrounding nations stand condemned for they mock the Lord because of Israel's downfall. But the people of Israel will return to their homeland to know more blessing than ever before. All reproach and disgrace will be removed. God is not going to do this for the sake of his rebellious people but to vindicate his own name. He will gather them from all the nations, cleanse them from idolatry and give them a new heart and a new spirit in place of their stony heart. This is looking forward to the New Testament and is partly referring to future events in Israel.

The Valley of Dry Bones (chap. 37)

Ezekiel has a vision of a valley full of bones (representing the dead nation of Israel). God asks him if the bones can live. He is told to prophesy that God will raise them to life. The bones rattled and joined into skeletons and then bodies. But he had to prophesy again before breath entered them. So

they became a great army. Thus God would restore Israel. Then Ezekiel was told to write on one stick a reference to Judah, and on another a reference to the northern kingdom of Israel (called here 'Joseph' or Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh, whose tribal areas formed the bulk of Israel). He held one stick in each fist so that one end of each was covered by his fist. He brought his fists together so that it looked like he was holding only one long stick. So God is going to re-unite his people and to return them from exile in the nations, to be one nation under a new 'King David.' They will dwell in the land for ever and enjoy an everlasting covenant with God. (This has not yet been fulfilled, of course).

The prophecy against Gog (chaps. 33-29)

This is a reference to the great battle of the end times - the Battle of Armageddon (see Rev. 16:14-16; 20:7-10). It is fashionable and comfortable to 'spiritualize' this as the on-going battle between good and evil. But the whole thrust of Old Testament prophecy in general and Ezekiel in particular is that predictions will be literally fulfilled. Present developments in the Middle East hardly suggest this is untrue. Gog is Prince of Meshech and Tubal from the land of Magog. Here Gog's allies are Persia (peoples from Russia who entered Iran before 1000BC), Cush (Ethiopia), Put (Libya); Beth-togarmah (Armenia) and Gomer (Ukrainians who came to Armenia). When this huge force attacks Israel, God will intervene against it with earthquakes, violent internal divisions, disease, torrential rains, hailstones, fire and brimstone. So Gog will be defeated. Their captured weapons provide enough rubbish to fuel Israel's fires for seven years. It will take seven months to bury the dead. God will pour out his Spirit and blessing upon a restored Israel.

The vision of the temple (chaps. 40-48)

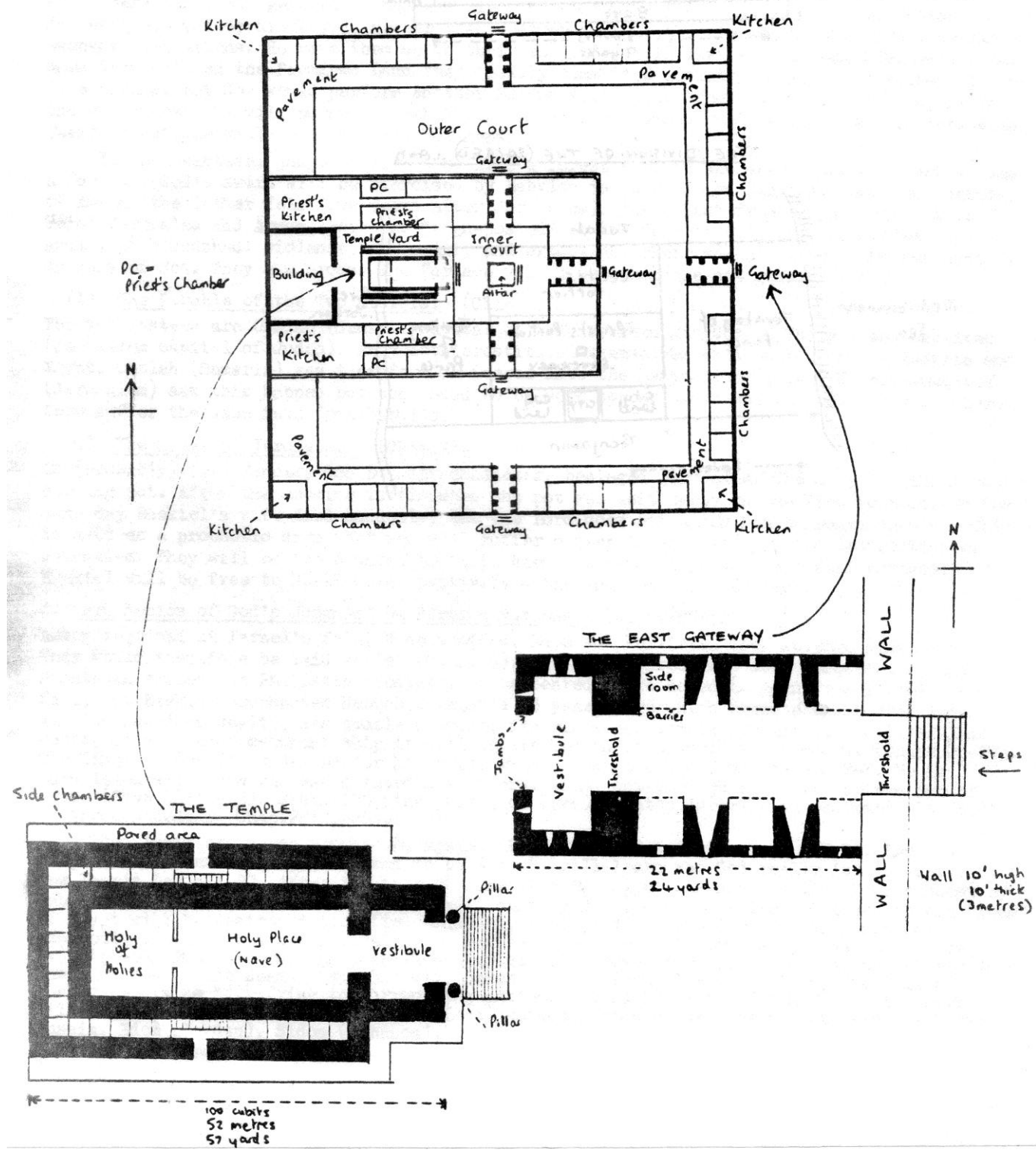
This is the climax of Ezekiel's prophecy. He is taken in a vision to a high mountain near Jerusalem (Mt.Zion?) and measures out a new temple as instructed by an angelic being. Scholars argue as to whether this is a literal temple Ezekiel wished to be built when the Jews returned from Babylon, or at a future date after the Gog invasion, or whether it is a symbolical temple referring to the Christian Church. These chapters are very complex and best understood by looking at the following diagrams. The temple was panelled with wood and carved with palm trees alternating with two-headed cherubs (the face of a man and of a lion). These may have been inlaid with ivory or carved and covered in gold. High clerestory, splayed windows lit the nave. But the holy of holies was in total darkness. A wooden table of the shewbread 3'5" square and 5' high stood in front of the double doors into the Holy of Holies (41:15-26).

The glory of the Lord (a vision similar to chapter 1) appeared and entered the temple from the east. The Lord said it is his house and will no more be defiled. Ezekiel is to proclaim the vision. He was given further rules about sacrificial offerings. No-one other than the king could enter the temple by the east gate, since that was the gate used by the Lord.

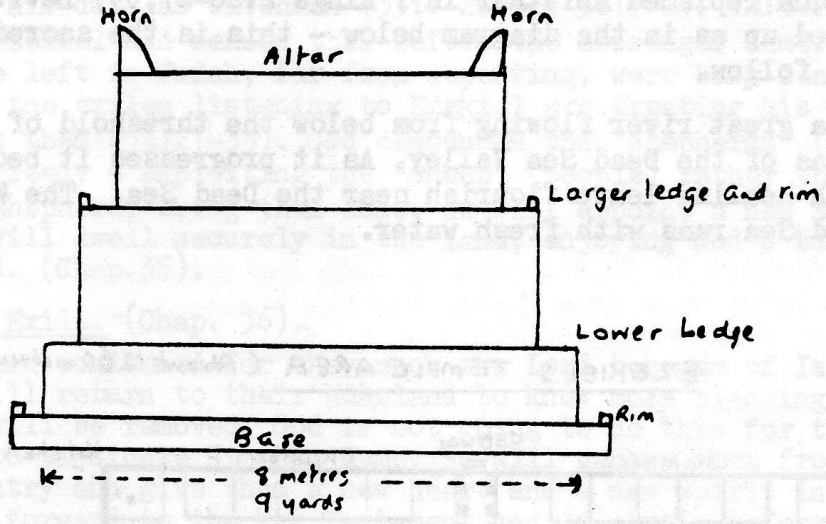
Uncircumcised foreigners could not enter the temple. Only Zadok's sons were allowed to minister as priests (Zadok replaced Abiathar in 1 Kings 2:26-27, 35). Levites are to assist them. The land is divided up as in the diagram below - this is the sacred portion of the land. Many lesser regulations follow.

Ezekiel sees a great river flowing from below the threshold of the temple and fertilising the barren areas of the Dead Sea valley. As it progresses it becomes too deep to wade through. Trees with healing leaves flourish near the Dead Sea. The Wadi el Arabah running south from the Dead Sea flows with fresh water.

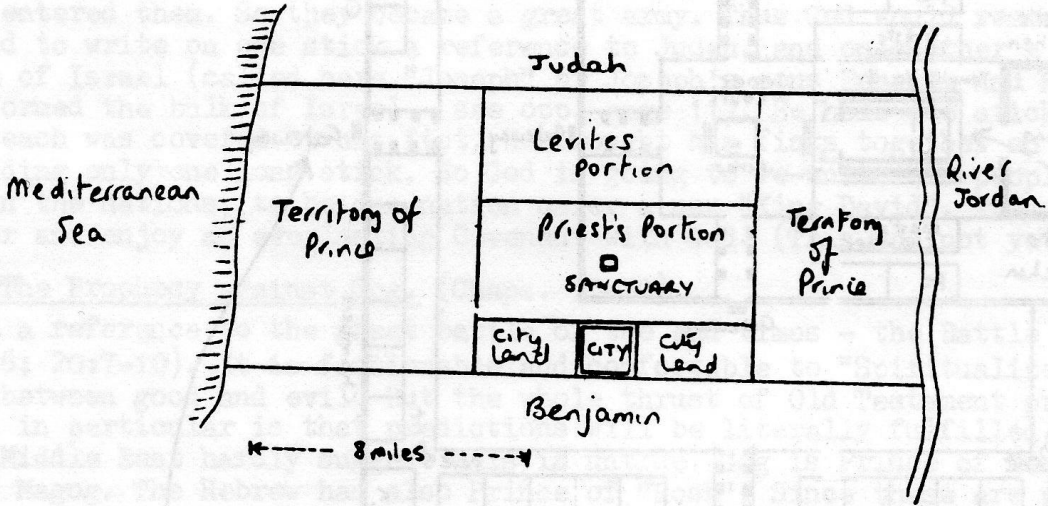
EZEKIELS TEMPLE AREA (About 260 metres, 285 yards square)



THE ALTAR OF BURNT OFFERING



THE DIVISION OF THE (SACRED) LAND



DANIEL

Daniel was a very intelligent man from a noble or even royal family in Judah, who was exiled as a boy in 605BC before Ezekiel was exiled. He became a statesman in Babylon and the book's first six chapters refer to Babylonian exile during a 70 year period. Chapter 2:4 to chapter 7:28 were written in Aramaic, the rest was in Hebrew.

Daniel in the court of Babylon (chaps. 1-6)

Nebuchadnezzar ordered that some of the most handsome and intelligent young men from the exiles should serve at the court and learn the Chaldean (Babylonian) language. Among them were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. They were given Babylonian names Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego in that order. They determined not to break the Old Testament law by eating 'unclean' food (Leviticus 11) or meat from animals not slaughtered so that the blood drained away (Leviticus 17). The civil servant in charge of the young men was worried that if they seemed underfed to the king, there would be trouble. Daniel asked him to allow them a vegetarian diet for 10 days and then to compare them with the other young men who ate the full royal food. In the end they looked better than the others. So they were allowed to remain vegetarians. Daniel and his friends gained a very high respect in the eyes of the king for their wisdom.

Nebuchadnezzar's dream (chap. 2)

The king had a very disturbing dream and demanded, on pain of death, his diviners and astrologers interpret it for him. They asked to know what the dream was, but the king had either forgotten or was refusing to tell them. They replied that no-one could meet the king's demand. So a decree went out that all the diviners and astrologers should be executed - including Daniel. He, however, made an appointment to see the king then asked his friends to pray earnestly. God revealed the dream and interpretation to Daniel in a vision, during the night. So Daniel stood before the king and claimed that God had revealed what no wise man could know. Nebuchadnezzar had dreamt of a very bright and frightening image with a gold head, silver breast and arms, bronze belly and thighs, legs of iron and feet of iron and clay mixed. Then a stone hit and shattered the feet. The other metal broke up and blew away. But the stone grew into a mountain filling the whole earth. Daniel interpreted it. The head of gold was the Babylonian empire with Nebuchadnezzar as its head. The silver was another empire (Medo-Persia) which would replace Babylon. The bronze was a third empire (Greece). The iron was a fourth empire (Rome) which would be worldwide. But the iron mixed with clay shows that the Roman empire would divide (which, of course, it did). The stone which shatters the image is the kingdom of God which will overcome all human empires. On hearing this interpretation, Nebuchadnezzar did homage to Daniel and appointed him governor of the province of Babylon. His three friends were similarly honoured.

The image and the furnace (chap. 3)

Some years later Nebuchadnezzar set up a 90 foot high golden idol and commanded everyone to worship it. Daniel's friends refused and Nebuchadnezzar ordered them to be burnt in a furnace or brick kiln. They were bound and thrown into the fire. It was so hot that the men who put them in were killed. But when Nebuchadnezzar looked in he saw the three friends unharmed accompanied by a God-like figure. The three were brought out and the king said all the people were to honour their God - the God of Israel.

The king's dream and madness (chap.4)

Nebuchadnezzar was disturbed by another dream. He saw a beautiful fruit tree growing up to heaven. It provided food and shelter for all creatures. Then an angel descended and commanded the tree to be cut down, leaving only a stump bound by iron and bronze amidst the grass. The stump was wet with dew, its mind changed from man's to beast's for seven years. Daniel was very upset by this. He interpreted the dream that Nebuchadnezzar was the tree and would be 'cut down' - becoming like an animal. After twelve months, as Nebuchadnezzar was boasting of his glory, he was struck by a mental illness which caused him to think he was an animal. (Other cases of this are known). He lived in the

fields and ate grass. Only when he eventually turned to worship the true God, did his reason return.

Belshazzar's feast (chap. 5)

Nabonidus, the last King of Babylon (556-539 BC), retired to Arabia leaving his son Belshazzar acting king. In 539, 23 years after Nebuchadnezzar's death, Belshazzar organized a great idolatrous feast, using vessels taken from the temple in Jerusalem. Then a mysterious hand wrote on the wall the words (referring to amounts of money) "a mina, a mina, a shekel and a half mina." The astrologers could not interpret for the king, so Daniel, now an old man, was called. Daniel reminded Belshazzar of Nebuchadnezzar's pride and downfall. The words on the wall were probably abbreviated like this, which is typical of Aramaic:

M N A	Thus the words might be either:
M N A	Mina, tekel (or shekel – one 60 th of a shekel), peres (half-mina) or parsin (half mina).
T Q L	or:
P R S	Mene (numbered), tekem (weighed) peris (divided) or paras (Persians)

So Daniel interpreted the words as meaning God had numbered Belshazzar's days as king, had weighed him up and found him wanting, and had divided his kingdom amongst the Medes and the Persians.

At the very time of the feast, Cyrus, the Mede, was diverting the course of the River Euphrates so that his army could capture the 'impregnable' city of Babylon via the dry river bed. (The walls of Babylon were 300 feet high and 85 feet thick, strengthened by 250 towers). Thus, the specific prophecy of Jeremiah 51:28-32 was fulfilled.

Danile in the lion's den (chap. 6)

We do not know who King Darius was. There is no record of him outside the Bible yet. But the name is not a proper name - but means 'subduer' and was used of various kings. Maybe he was a vassal king or shared the kingship over Babylon. Daniel was one of the 120 satraps or governors in the land. He was the king's favourite, so his colleagues tried to discredit him. They realized they could only do it through religious means. So they asked the king to proclaim that for one month no-one should pray to any god except the king. But Daniel ignored the edict. The king was distressed, but "the law of Medes and the Persians cannot be altered." So Daniel was thrown into the den of lions. After a sleepless night, the king hurried to find Daniel unharmed. So an edict went out to honour Daniel's God. However, Daniel's accusers were thrown to the lions and were killed.

DANIEL'S VISIONS

Vision of the four beasts (chap. 7)

Back in the first year of Belshazzar Daniel dreamt of the winds stirring up the sea and then of four beasts ascending from the sea. They were four empires (see chap.2). People like Nebuchadnezzar saw only the superficial glory of the empire. Daniel saw the evil spiritual forces which controlled these empires like evil beasts. The first was a *winged lion* (or a griffin-vulture common in Israel). This was a symbol of Babylon as archaeology shows. But then the wings were removed and the beast stood on two feet and received a human mind. It is true that early Babylonian cruelty was gradually replaced by more humanity and tolerance. Then a *bear* appeared - the Medo-Persian empire, an 'inferior breed' to Babylon. It was raised up on one side which may refer to the subjection of the Medes to the Persians. It had ribs in its mouth showing its vicious greed for conquest. Daniel then saw a four headed *leopard* or panther with two birds wings on either side of it. This refers to the Greek empire of Alexander the Great which followed the Medo-Persian empire. With the swiftness of a winged leopard he conquered: far and wide. The four heads refer to the division of the Greek empire amongst Alexander's four generals after his death. The *fourth beast is not fully described*, but has iron teeth, bronze claws and is a terrible animal. This refers to the Roman empire. It had ten horns, which seem to parallel the ten toes, in Nebuchadnezzar's image, and the ten horns of the Beast in Rev.13:1-2, which was a cross between a leopard, bear and lion. The horns refer to ten kings which divide the Roman empire. Some believe that this period of Roman history is future - a revived Roman empire divided

into ten nations.

Then an eleventh horn (kingdom) sprang up - smaller than the rest but more powerful and replacing three of the ten horns. This horn had human eyes and a mouth speaking proud presumptions things against God's people. The parallel with the beast in Revelation 13:5 is remarkable - referring to a final world emperor. At this blasphemy the "Ancient of Days" (God) appeared - his clothes snow white, his hair like wool, on a throne of fire on wheels of fire. Fire came from the throne and thousands served him. The books of human history were read in this heavenly court. Then the fourth beast was destroyed and within a short time the other three were too. At this point "one like a son of man" was presented to the Ancient of Days. "Son of man" was a favourite title used by Jesus of himself. (Matt.24:30). He was given the everlasting kingdom

Daniel asked one of the heavenly beings for further explanations of the vision. He then mentioned that in the vision the eleventh horn "was waging war against the holy people" and prevailed until the Ancient of Days came when judgment was given for the saints and they received the kingdom (v.21-22). He was told that the four empires will arise but the saints of the Most High will receive an everlasting kingdom (v.17-18).

The "little horn" fights against the saints. It may well be that this refers to the regular persecution of believers throughout history, e.g. the Jews under Antiochus Epiphanes, the early Christians under Rome, etc. But the passage refers to a final fulfilment before the second coming of Christ - the "great distress" of Matt. 24; Luke 21:10-33; Rev. 13. The "little horn" changes human laws, customs and institutions (v.25). But he is allowed only "a time, times and half a time" i.e. three and a half years to continue his evil. Similarly, the "beast" in Rev.13 is given 42 months (Rev.13:5). So evil will be strictly limited by God and short lived.

The vision of the ram and the he-goat (chap. 8)

With chapter 8 the book reverts to the Hebrew language. Chapters 1-7 were in Aramaic -the international language - and referred to the world as a whole. But the rest of the book refers to the covenant people Israel, and so was in their language. Two years after the vision in chap. 7 (still in the reign of Belshazzar before the events related in Chap. 5) Daniel had another vision. He saw a ram which grew first one horn (symbol of power) then a second bigger one. These horns represent the kings of Media and Persia (v.20). The Persians dominated the Medes. Incidentally, the Persian king wore a jewelled ram's head of gold instead of a crown. The ram butted to the N, S and W. Suddenly a he-goat appeared from the west. It had one single horn. The goat is often used as a symbol of Macedonia in Greece and impressed on its coins. The horn represents Alexander the Great who with the swiftness of a goat conquered 'the world' in 12 years. The ram was utterly defeated by the he-goat. Alexander wiped out the Medo-Persian empire in six years. But then the arrogant he-goat had his horn broken. Alexander, weakened by debauchery, caught a fever and in eleven days died, aged 32, after less than 13 years reign. The single horn (Alexander) was replaced by four horns (four of Alexander's generals took over the empire).

Then out of one of the horns (the Syrian kingdom of Seleucus) came a little horn (Antiochus Epiphanes, the son of Antiochus III, the Great). Unexpectedly, after the Roman's conquered his father, Antiochus Epiphanes eventually became king (175 - 164BC) following imprisonment in Rome. So he was a 'little' horn who grew greatly. He fought against the south (Egypt), the east (Elymais) and "the Beautiful Land" (Palestine). He was slightly mad and extremely arrogant. He attacked the "host of the heavens" (the people of God) and "trampled" (martyred) some of them. But he even attacked the "Prince of the host" (God). Antiochus plundered and desecrated the temple, profaning it dreadfully, stopped the sacrifices and feasts and massacred many Jews. But the profanation would only last for 2,300 days. Antiochus first interfered with the Jews in 171BC. Judas Maccabeus, the Jewish leader, cleansed the temple in 165BC. This is the period of 2,300 days. Antiochus died in 164BC.

The angel Gabriel was then told to explain the vision to Daniel who was terrified. He passed out and

was restored by the angel. It is clear that the vision is only partly fulfilled by Antiochus. It foreshadows a greater fulfilment in the time of the end (verses 17, 19 and 26). The Bible prophets often 'concertina' historical events which are many years or even centuries apart. After all this, Daniel spent some days in bed suffering from complete exhaustion.

Daniel's confession and the "seventy sevens" (chap. 9)

In 538BC Daniel recalled that Jeremiah prophesied the captivity would last 70 years and the time was very nearly up. So he confessed the nation's sins to God – "the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments" (v.4). "The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him" (v.9). "We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy" (v.18).

Then Gabriel reappeared to him to give him further insights, saying he, Daniel, was "highly esteemed" (v.23). He told Daniel that there would be a period of "seventy sevens" (or "seventy weeks") of years i.e. 490 years. It must be remembered that there is a good deal of symbolism in Daniel's prophecies and numbers can be used symbolically too. However, many Christians think it is fairly clear from the very definite fulfilments of Daniel's earlier visions already, and from Jeremiah's prophecy that the exile would (and did) last seventy years, that we should take this prophecy literally. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that at the end of this period sin would be brought to an end by atonement (referring to the cross). The kingdom of righteousness would be brought in and the "Most Holy Place" anointed (v.24).

From the time of the command to rebuild Jerusalem to the coming of "the anointed one" would be 7 + 62 sevens of years. The "anointed one" is literally the messiah, the prince who will be "put to death" after this period. Then the people of the prince who is to come will destroy the city and sanctuary. There have been different understandings of this passage. But the following view seems convincing. The command to rebuild Jerusalem came from Artaxerxes to Nehemiah in 445BC. From this date 7 + 62 weeks of years (483 years) bring us into the period of Jesus' ministry. One scholar claims to have timed it precisely as finishing on the first Palm Sunday when the prince rode into the city - soon to be "put to death." Then, in AD 70, some 40 years later, Titus the Roman prince, destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. All of this is surely far too precise to be coincidence.

But then there is the 70th week (v.27). When does that happen? The person referred to is surely the Roman prince. There doesn't seem to have been a fulfilment of this verse in history yet, so some scholars say it refers to a future seven year period. This great time gap between consecutive verses is not uncommon in the Bible. It happens, for example, in Luke 21 where Jesus prophesies the future and runs the events which happened in AD. 70 into events which are still future (see also Acts 2:15-21). Also the Old Testament time-chart tends to miss out periods when the Israelites were alienated from God and under foreign oppression. Hence it could be here that the prophecy is omitting the time between the cross - when the Jews rejected their messiah until they (in the future) come to accept him after centuries of exile (Rom 11:25-27). It seems therefore to mean that a future 'Roman' ruler - a western 'emperor' (see notes on Daniel 7:7-27) will make a seven year treaty with the Jews. But after 3.5 years he will break the treaty and oppress the Jews for a further 3.5 years (see parallels in Dan. 7:25; 12:7; Rev. 1 1:2-3, 12:6, 14; 13:5). Also the "abomination that causes desolation" will come. See how Paul speaks of this in 2 Thess. 2:3-4 - the man of lawlessness who proclaims he is God and who will be destroyed by Christ at the second coming. It will be a time of great suffering (the "great distress"). The "abomination that causes desolation" will be a leader of the Jews who is in league with the Roman emperor (see below on 9:36).

Daniel's vision of the Lord (chap 10-11:1)

In the third year of Cyrus' reign some Jews had returned to rebuild the temple. But the aged Daniel remained in Babylon. After a long fast he had a vision of the Lord (very similar to Ezekiel's in Ezk, 1 and John's in Rev. 1). Like Paul, he fell to the ground and his companions fled in terror, although they did not see the vision. Eventually, Daniel passed out. But the Lord aroused him and told him of the

battle raging in the spiritual realm between forces seeking to destroy the Jews and forces protecting them. Michael, “a chief prince” (v.13; chap.12:1) or “archangel” (Jude 9), is the guardian angel of the Jews. The other ‘princes’ are patron angels of other nations. The “prince of Persia” is an evil angel - one of Satan's angels - seeking to bring evil on the chosen people. But he was defeated and a similar evil angel over Greece will follow him. Daniel is in pain as a reaction to the awe-inspiring vision. The Lord encourages him and proceeds to reveal more of the future.

The struggle for power – past and future (chap 11:2-45)

This chapter prophesying the future has proved remarkably accurate so far in history. It is largely a fuller version of Chap. 8. There would be three more Persian kings (v.2) - Cambyses, Gaumata, and Darius I, then a fourth, Xerxes, whose wealth was immense. At the height of his power he invaded Greece (480BC) but was defeated at Salamis. After this Alexander the Great - the warrior king (v.3) would arise. On his premature death, the empire was divided between four generals - Ptolemy, Lysimachus, Seleucus, Nicator and Cassander. None of Alexander's sons succeeded him (v.4). The empire was divided in 301BC. Ptolemy Soter had taken Egypt and so was “king of the south” (v.5). Seleucus, one time general of Ptolemy, received the larger northern division of the empire (v. 5).

Fifty years later, Antiochus II (king of the north) divorced his wife Laodice and married Berenice, the daughter of Ptolemy III (king of the south). But when Ptolemy died, Antiochus gave up Berenice and returned to his first wife (v.6). She poisoned him and had Berenice and her son killed. Laodice's son, Seleucus II, became king. But Berenice's brother, Ptolemy III, invaded Syria, killed Laodice and captured much of the northern part of the empire (v.7). He took much spoil (v.8). After years of peace, Seleucus made an abortive attack on Egypt (v. 9). Antiochus III, the Great, attacked Egypt (v. 10) but after early successes Ptolemy IV of Egypt retaliated successfully (v. 11). Ptolemy returned to Alexandria and killed 40,000 Jews (v. 12) but he died 13 years later leaving a son Ptolemy V, aged 4. Then Antiochus with a great army, including many Jews, invaded and defeated Egypt (v. 13-15). Antiochus gave his daughter Cleopatra in a marriage alliance with Ptolemy V, but she was loyal to her husband rather than her father (v. 17). Antiochus then invaded Asia Minor and Greece but was defeated by the Romans in 190BC at Magnesia (vv.18-20).

Antiochus' son, Seleucus IV spent most of his twelve year reign raising tribute money to pay to the Romans (v. 20) before he was poisoned. His brother Antiochus IV Epiphanes replaced him through flattering and bribing various leaders (v. 21). He was contemptible, immoral (he indulged in public sexual intercourse) and degraded. He defeated an Egyptian attack (v. 22) and broke an alliance with Ptolemy by gaining stealthy control of much of Egypt (v. 23-24). He then carefully attacked and defeated Ptolemy (v. 25-26). Both Antiochus and Ptolemy tried to deceive each other treacherously (v.27). On returning home, Antiochus found Palestine in revolt. Jason the High Priest in Jerusalem had been replaced through bribery by Menelaus under Antiochus' authority. But Jason led 1,000 mercenaries to capture Jerusalem and depose Menelaus. So Antiochus massacred 40,000 Jews and enslaved 40,000 others. Menelaus robbed the temple then sacrificed swine on the altar and sprinkled the temple with swine broth - an abomination to the Jews (v.28). Antiochus advanced towards Egypt again but the Romans sailed to Egypt and demanded he withdraw (v.29-30). On returning through Palestine, he massacred many Jews, banned temple ritual and set fire to the city. He commanded that all should follow Greek religion, reconsecrated the temple to Jupiter Olympus and proclaimed himself a god. He enlisted the help of apostate Jews in all this (v.31-32). But some remained faithful and were dreadfully persecuted until the Maccabean rebellion (v. 33-34) when Judas Maccabaeus led the Jews to victory.

Then a new king is referred to (v. 36). What is said of him is not fulfilled in the life of Antiochus or the Romans. The “king of the north” attacked him (Antiochus was the “king of the north”). The “king of the south” attacked him too. This means he would be a ruler in Palestine. The behaviour described could only be partly true of Antiochus and the Romans. It seems, therefore, to refer to the “man of lawlessness” prophesied in 2 Thess.2:4 who will “will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to

be God” This man (also called the “false prophet” – Rev 16:13; 19:20; 20:10, and “the beast rising out of the earth” in Rev. 13:11) will rule over a restored state of Israel and its temple worship. He will almost be an incarnation of Satan (2 Thess. 2:9-12). Verse 40 also refers these happenings to the time of the end.

The alliance between this ruler and the king of the western empire will not prevent Palestine being attacked from the south - Libya, Ethiopia, Egypt (v.40). But the “king of the north” will then attack to drive the southern league out, and to conquer Egypt. But at this time news from Palestine (the north east) will alarm him. This may be that the Jewish ruler will succeed in getting the western emperor and other countries from the east to come up to help and will besiege Jerusalem (Rev. 19:19; 16:12). Then the Lord will return to defeat the foe (Rev. 19:20-21; Joel 13:2; Zech.14:1-5; 2 Thess. 2:8).

Victory (chap. 12)

Michael the archangel, protector of the Jews (see 10:13) will, during the events of 11:36-45, take action to deliver the people of God. This is the “time of great suffering” (Matt.24:21; Rev.7:14). The faithful ones will be saved. Resurrection is promised - some to everlasting life, others to everlasting shame. Daniel is the first Old Testament book to speak explicitly of resurrection.

Daniel is now told to seal up the book - not to keep it secret but to preserve it safe. Many will “go here and there” in the book, ie. studying it, and knowledge shall increase through reading it (v. 4). Then he saw two angels standing, one on each bank of the river. Another figure in fine linen hovered over the river. The question was asked: how long until these events are ended? The latter figure raised both hands in a solemn oath in God’s name (compare Rev. 10:6) that it would be 3.5 times or 3.5 years in duration (see Rev. 11:3-11; 12:6, 14: 13:5). Daniel does not fully understand the prophecy and is told it is for the time of the end (v. 9) when it will be understood by the wise (v.10). (The two figures of 1,290 days and 1,335 days are, of course, just over 3.5 years - the years were counted as of 360 days in ancient times). It is promised to Daniel finally that after death he would rise to his inheritance.

HOSEA

Hosea lived at the same time as Isaiah (8th century BC) in the northern kingdom of Israel. He prophesied to that kingdom and only occasionally mentioned Judah. He prophesied for 40 years from the end of the reign of Jereboam II until just before Samaria fell to Assyria in 772BC. It was a time of serious religious and moral decline (see 2 Kings 14:23 – 17:41). There were six kings in 20 years, four of whom assassinated their predecessors.

Hosea's Family (chaps. 1 -3)

Hosea is told by God to marry Gomer, a woman who would betray and desert him. She had three children who were given names of prophetic significance to Israel. The first was "Jezreel" foretelling God's judgment on Israel for the slaughter at Jezreel of Ahab's 70 sons by Jehu (2 Kings 10). The second was called "Not Pitied" – God's attitude to Israel. The third – "Not my people" signifying God's rejection of Israel, although Judah will be pitied. However, in the end, God will restore the fortunes of Israel and Judah (1:10-2:1).

Hosea pleads with Gomer to return and be faithful to him. The words have double meaning however, and are God's words to unfaithful Israel who is committing spiritual adultery with Baal worship. Baal, the Canaanite fertility god, was given the credit for good crops and harvests (v.8-9) so Israel will be punished. Even after this God will take Israel as his beloved bride again (vv. 14-23).

Hosea buys back Gomer from being another man's slave. So Israel is to be deprived of a king and of religious rituals for a time but will eventually return to God (chap.3).

Israel's prostitution and judgment (chap. 4 - 5: 14)

Israel lacks faithfulness, kindness and knowledge of God. It is full of swearing, lying, killing, stealing, adultery and murder. The priests did not teach God's law and lived for selfish gain (4:4-10). Idolatry had led to cult prostitution (4:11-19). God is withdrawing from them in judgment. Their children do not know the Lord (5:7). Judah is also warned in that it shares Israel's sins (5:8-12). Israel had asked the help of Tiglath-Pileser III, King of Assyria (2 Kings 16:5) but he could not save Israel from judgment (5:13-14).

Israel's 'repentance' (chap.5:15 - 6:6)

In her suffering Israel says "Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. Let us acknowledge the LORD; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth" (6:1, 3). But God sees that this 'repentance' is shallow and says "Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears. For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings" (6:4, 6).

Israel's corruption (chap. 6:7 -8:14)

The priests commit murder. Shechem - the religious centre of Israel - is full of intrigue and murder. (6:7-10). At the royal court conspirators act against the kings (7:6-7). The nation seeks foreign help and foreign gods but not the Lord. (7:8-16). They set up kings without God's approval. They make idols (8:1-6). But "They sow the wind and reap the whirlwind" (8:7). In spite of foreign alliances they will go into bondage. Israel and Judah will be attacked (8:8-14).

Israel's judgment (chap. 9 & 10)

Probably at the festival celebrating the grape harvest, Hosea prophesies failure of the harvest, "returning to Egypt" (i.e. captivity) and eating 'unclean' food in Assyria. There will be no bread and wine for sacrifices (9:1-5). Hosea is regarded as a fool but he knows he is God's watchman (9:7-8). The nation's children will be judged. God is casting them off as a punishment (9:9-17). Affluent Israel

has a great show of religion (10:1) but their hearts are far from obeying God. The only 'king' they accepted was the idolatrous calf-image at Bethel. But this would be carried off by the Assyrians (10:3-8). Their continual sin will lead to punishment and slavery. God calls them to sow righteousness and reap steadfast love - breaking up their "unploughed ground" and seeking the Lord (10:12). But they have sown iniquity and reaped injustice. They trusted in military strength which would fail them (10:13-15).

God's fatherly love for Israel (chap.11)

Israel as God's son and child was called out of Egypt (the Exodus), but "the more they were called, the more they went away from me" (11:2) and committed idolatry. God taught Ephraim (Israel) to walk and picked him up. "I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love." He fed them (11:3-4). They will however return to 'Egypt' (slavery) in Assyria. The nation will be destroyed. Yet God's heart recoils from such punishment - "all my compassion is aroused" (11:5-9). He will eventually bring them out of captivity (11:10-12).

Israel's 'independence' from God and judgment (chaps. 12 & 13)

The nation makes treaties with Egypt and Assyria. In history Jacob was a schemer who had to learn dependence on God (12:2-6). Israel trusted in riches but they would fail (12:7-9). They despised the prophets but, in fact, the nation was formed through a prophet -Moses (12:10-14). They worship idols who are no gods. The Lord alone is God who brought them through the wilderness only to be rejected when they grew affluent (13:1-6). So now he will judge them. His judgment will be like the scorching east wind from the desert.

God's plea for Israel's return (chap. 14)

God pleads with Israel to forsake idolatry and foreign alliances and to return to him in repentance. "I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them they will flourish like the grain, they will blossom like the vine" (v. 4, 7). This is the wise course of action. Israel ignored Hosea's threats and pleas. In 722BC Assyria destroyed Samaria - the capital.

JOEL

The only thing we know about Joel is that his father's name was Pethuel. We do not know when the book was written, but the message is timeless. He probably lived in Judah.

The plague of locusts (chap. 1)

To this day the desert wind from Arabia can carry a swarm of several million locusts into Israel. The locusts have insatiable appetites and, like an invading army, strip the earth of every green and growing plant. The drunkards bewail the lack of wine because the vines are destroyed (v.5). The locusts were innumerable. In 1889 a locust flight extending over 2,000 miles passed over the Red Sea. A rough estimate was that there were 24 billion insects. With their horn-like teeth the locusts, says Joel, stripped the bark off the vines and fig trees (v.6-7). The Lord calls on his nation to grieve like a bride who had lost her bridegroom (v.8). The lack of food and wine meant that the cereal and drink offerings ceased. The people therefore felt a loss of contact with the Lord (v.9). The wheat and barley harvests were ruined, vine, fig, pomegranate, palm and apple trees were stripped "Surely the people's joy is withered away" (v. 11-12),

The Lord calls on the priests and Levites to mourn the cessation of the sacrifices. They are to call a fast and a solemn assembly of the people at the temple (v. 13-14). The locust swarm was an object lesson warning the people of the coming day of the Lord. It is, in fact, a call to repentance. That great day will be a day of trial by fire for Judah - not only for her enemies. The very earth seems to conspire against the people. The animals wander in distress at the lack of food (vv. 15-13). Joel cries out in prayer to the Lord about the tragedy (v. 19-20).

Signs of the day of the Lord (chap. 2:1 -11)

Joel summons the priests to blow the trumpet as an alarm for the day of the Lord is coming. Just as a locust swarm makes the sky as dark as an eclipse, so that day will be "a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness" (v.2). Like a vast army the locusts will advance. The people have seen nothing like this, nor will again. They 'scorch' the earth. In front of them the land is green and fertile, like the garden of Eden. Behind them it is desolate, nothing escapes them and nothing will escape the devastating judgment of God on the Day of the Lord. Eyewitnesses have said that after a locust plague the land does look as if it has been burnt.

The locusts were like war-horses - the head of the locust is similar in shape to a horse's head and their leaping is, perhaps, like a horse galloping. The Book of Revelation speaks of a locust plague as part of God's future final judgment on the earth (Rev. 9:1-11). They are like horses arrayed for battle (Rev. 9:7). The sound of the locusts was like rumbling of chariots or crackling of a flame burning stubble. Eyewitnesses have described the sound of flying locusts as like a waterfall or a strong wind blowing through trees. The sound of locusts eating is like a prairie fire driven by the wind. The people panic before the plague and so they might. Not only is there devastation of property but starvation. After a locust plague in Algiers in 1856, 200,000 people are said to have died of starvation.

But the locusts move on irresistibly. They go straight forward - climbing the highest walls, trees and obstacles. They never get in each others way. Weapons cannot stop them. If any are killed, the rest close ranks. Throughout history people have tried to stop them with fires and water-filled ditches, but the fires are put out and the ditches filled with the vast numbers of insects. They cover the ground for several inches.

However, Joel is obviously referring to greater catastrophies than actual locust plagues. The Day of the Lord (the final future judgment of the world) will be evidenced by cosmic disturbances in the sun, moon and earth (v.10-11).

The call for repentance (chap. 2:12-27)

In spite of all this, the Lord is still calling his people to return to him: “with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity” (v. 12-13). Even now the Lord may avert judgment. The whole nation is called to repent with fasting. The priests and Levites are to plead with God to have mercy on his chosen people - for his own name’s sake. Their enemies would ridicule their God if they were destroyed.

It seems that Joel’s prophecy had effect and the people repented – at least for a time. Because of this the Lord expresses jealousy for “his land” and pities “his people.” He promises to replace the grain, wine and oil which the locusts have eaten, so that the nation will no longer be a reproach to her neighbours. He will rid the land of the “northern horde” (v. 20). This may be human enemies symbolised by the locusts or could be locusts, except that it is most unlikely locusts would come from the north.

Then Joel sings a prophetic song of praise. The land and animals are not to fear but to be glad for God is doing great things - the pastures and the fruit trees are restored. The early end latter rains of the year come, the threshing floors and wine are overflowing. “I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten” (v.25). The people will eat in plenty and be satisfied, knowing God is in their midst.

The prophecy of Pentecost (chap. 2:28-29)

These verses are proclaimed by Peter on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:17-21 as being fulfilled in the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on that day. The Spirit would be poured out not only on leaders, prophets and priests, but upon ordinary people - young and old, male and female. The immediate evidences would be prophecy and prophetic dreams and visions. The day of Pentecost initiated “the last days” - which are still going on today. So Pentecost began a new order of spiritual things of which the events of Acts 2 were the first example.

Cosmic disturbances on the day of the Lord (chap. 2:30-32)

These verses are again quoted by Peter in Acts 2:17-21 and are parallel with Revelation 6:12. At a time still future, the Day of the Lord will come in judgment. There will be extraordinary happenings in the heavens and earth; “blood and fire” - either war worse than any previous wars or abnormal atmospheric conditions; “billows of smoke” - either from destroyed cities or devastating dust storms. The sun will be eclipsed and the moon be turned to blood - possibly again through dreadful whirlwinds whipping up dust. But all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. As the “last days” draw to a close these events will begin to happen.

The restoration of Judah and Israel before the day of the Lord (chap. 3:1-3)

Israel will be restored to their land (vv. 1-2) which the nations have divided up (v. 2). It does seem more than a coincidence that the nation of Israel was re-established in their ancient homeland in 1948. The ancient land, which at its height, stretched from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates (1 Kings 4:24), has certainly been divided up by the nations, particularly Britain and France. So now it includes territory which belongs to the Jordanians, Iraqis, Syrians, Jordanians and the Palestinian areas. Even the British Mandate of Palestine included what is now Jordan and was divided up by the British. Some Christians believe God intends Israel to have all this territory but we must remember the heavy prophetic emphasis on justice and fair treatment, including of the foreigner.

The judgment of the nations (chap 3:4-21)

The Lord will call all the nations to judgment in the “valley of Jehoshaphat” because they have maltreated his people. The word Jehoshaphat means “the Lord judges.” Tyre, Sidon (Lebanon), Philistia, Egypt, Edom (Jordan) will be judged. The enemies of Israel need to prepare for war because the Lord will fight against them. But he is a refuge for Israel. Jerusalem will belong to his people. The land will be exceptionally fruitful. A fountain will come forth from the temple - this has reference to the messiah (see Ezekiel 47:1-12, Zech. 14:8; Revelation 22:1-2).

AMOS

Amos kept sheep and cultivated sycamore figs. He came from the fortified town of Tekoa, on the road to Engedi, 10 miles south of Jerusalem, 5 miles south of Bethlehem. Only 12 miles to the east and 4000 feet below lies the Dead Sea. It was a wild and rugged place which helped to create the rugged character of Amos. He may have owned sheep and travelled to sell wool in the northern kingdom of Israel where he would get higher prices. His visits would probably coincide with religious festivals. So God sent him as a prophet to the northern kingdom. He then lived at Bethel where Jereboam I had set up the calf image when the nation first split. Amos ministered in the very prosperous reign of Jereboam II (793-753BC). He is the earliest of the prophets who have books recorded in the Bible. His ministry overlapped with Hosea and probably Jonah. The people of Israel ignored Amos' denunciation of social and religious corruption. Thirty years after Jereboam's death, the Assyrians destroyed Samaria (the capital) and exiled the people.

Condemnation of surrounding nations (chap.1 - 2:5)

Amos was a visionary or seer. The visions came two years before "the earthquake." Archaeology has revealed an earthquake shattered Hazor in N. Galilee during this period. Amos describes the Lord as like a roaring, pouncing lion. He speaks from Zion (Jerusalem) - the old capital of the whole (united) nation. From the pastures in the river valley to the top of Mt. Carmel judgment will fall.

"For three sins ..., even for four" (i.e. an indefinite number) the nations are condemned: Syria for running studded threshing sledges over the bodies of their captives. Fire will destroy the house of the Syrian Kings Hazael and Benhadad (v.3-5). Syria will be exiled. The Philistines will be punished for slave trading (v.6-8). Tyre is denounced for slave trading with Edom and forgetting the brotherly relationship with Solomon -1 Kings 9:13 (vv.9-10). Edom also forgot the relationship between Jacob (father of Israel) and Esau, father of Edom (v.11-12). The Ammonites committed atrocities simply to gain more land (v.13-15). Moab committed the terrible crime of desecrating the corpse of the king of Edom (2:1-3). Judah is condemned for rejecting the law of the Lord (2:4-5).

Condemnation of Israel (chap. 2:5-16)

Israel is now condemned in detail. "They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed" (v.6-7). They indulge in religious prostitution and they did not return garments taken in pledge by nightfall (thus oppressing the poor, see Exodus 22:26-27). Yet the Lord brought them out of Egypt, through the wilderness and defeated the Amorites (Canaanites) for them. Israel forced the Nazirites to break their vow to the Lord of abstinence from wine. They ordered the prophets to be quiet.

Punishment of Israel (chaps.3-4)

God says "You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins" (v.2). Israel has broken the covenant with the Lord so they will be punished. It is simply cause and effect (v.3-6). "Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets" (7.7-8). Amos invites Assyria and Egypt to spectate at the depravity and punishment of Israel. They will see in spite of economic affluence, great unrest and insecurity with oppression and extortion. Their prosperity has come between them and God and it has sapped their strength to face crises. Just as a shepherd rescues bits of his sheep from the lion, so only bits of Israel will be left after the invasion. The great stone houses and beautiful ivory panels will be almost entirely destroyed. (The rich owned two houses). The paganised religion with its altars at Bethel will be destroyed.

The rich women of Samaria (the "cows of Bashan") love luxury, even at the expense of the poor. They pressed their husbands to outdo one another in providing parties and feasts. But, says Amos, they will be led away with hooks in their noses. (The Assyrians literally did this with their captives).

The religion at Bethel amounted to sin - for all its sacrifices and tithes. This will lead to famine. The winter rain (October - February) would fail, bringing havoc to the crops. Scorching desert winds blight, mildew and locusts would destroy the crops. Disease (v.10) would afflict the people. Israel should prepare to meet her God.

A call to repentance (chap.5)

There follows a lament that "the virgin Israel" has fallen never to rise. Very few people would remain (v.1-3). Amos calls the people to seek God but not at the idolatrous sanctuaries of Bethel, Gilgal and Beersheba, or the shrines of

the Assyrian gods Sakkuth and Kaiwan (v. 26 margin) who were associated with Saturn. They should seek God who made the Pleiades and Orion, day and night, and the sea. But Israel rejects reproof. Instead they extort money from the poor and take bribes. They should hate evil and love good, establishing justice. But there will be judgment and weeping in town and countryside. The day of the Lord will bring judgment on them not just on their enemies. The Lord says "I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (v.21-24). Verse 26 is unclear and some have said it indicates Israel did not offer sacrifices in the wilderness. However, it is clear they did, so the best understanding of the verse is that God asks if they *only* offered sacrifices in the wilderness. No, the *moral* law was obeyed too.

The coming exile (chaps.6-8)

Israel and Judah had a false sense of security which Amos attacked: "Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria" (v.1). Kalneh and Hamath in Syria with Gath in Philistia had thought they were secure but were attacked by Assyria. The rich in Israel had couches with inlaid ivory, they were the idle rich, eating luxurious food, singing idle songs, drinking wine, anointing themselves with perfumes - not seeing or lamenting the approaching exile. God hates Israel's pride. Hardly anyone will survive the invasion. But the invader is coming (chap.6).

Amos pleads with God to delay judgment for he had had a vision of a locust invasion. The Lord heard his prayer. He then saw a vision of destruction by fire. Again the Lord heard his prayer for mercy. Then he saw a plumb-line. Israel did not match up to the straight line of God's judgment.

At this point Amaziah the priest of Bethel told King Jeroboam that Amos was conspiring against the throne with his 'negative' prophecies, foretelling the king's death and Israel's exile. Amaziah told Amos to go home to Judah and prophesy. Amos replied that he was no professional prophet but a herdsman chosen by God to prophesy in Israel. Furthermore, Amaziah would die in exile. The invader would abuse his wife, kill his children and seize his land (chap.7).

Then Amos saw a vision of a basket of summer fruit which shows the season is at an end - so the end is coming for Israel because of their oppression of the poor and unscrupulous, dishonest business. The end will be a day of darkness with no joyful feasts but rather famine and drought. There will be no word from the Lord (chap.8).

A faithful remnant will survive (chap. 9)

Amos had a vision of the Lord beside the altar, and the Lord commanded that the sanctuary and the worshippers should be destroyed. No hiding place would be safe. God will deal with them like a pagan nation and will "sieve" them amongst the nations. But he will preserve a remnant who will rebuild the land, enjoy phenomenal blessing and never be plucked up from the land again. (The complete fulfilment of this is still future).

OBADIAH

Obadiah prophesied Edom's downfall. The Edomites occupied mountain strongholds to the S.E. of the Dead Sea. Their capital Sela (Petra) was almost impregnable. From there they often attacked Judah. When they did this as the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem in 587 BC, Obadiah reacted by prophesying Edom's doom. They thought they were safe but God would make them small and despised. They would be utterly destroyed. Unlike thieves or grape-gatherers who left some goods or grapes, not a single thing would remain. Their Arab allies would deceive them. And all this was because Edom had maltreated his "brother" Israel (i.e. they were related via Jacob and Esau).

In the fifth century BC, the Arabs conquered Edom. In the third century BC, the Nabataeans took over and built Petra. Judas Maccabees plundered Edom in the second century BC. Herod the Great was a descendant of Edomites who had settled in Judah. Edom disappeared from history after AD.70.

The day of the Lord will bring judgment on all nations. A remnant in Mount Zion will escape (See Joel 2:32). Israel will return to possess a much wider territory including Edom (Jordan), Gilead (Jordan), Zarephath (Sarafand in Lebanon). The fulfilment of all this is still future.

JONAH

Jonah lived in the mid 8th century BC and is referred to in 2 Kings 14:25. He would therefore be a contemporary of Amos and Hosea. He was sent to Nineveh, the capital of Israel's enemy Assyria. The Babylonians destroyed Nineveh in 612 BC. Many people take the book as a parable. They would therefore not regard the 'fish' incident as literal. After all, it is difficult to know how Jonah would have been able to breathe and how he would have survived the effect of the digestive juices – unless it were indeed a miracle. Those who take it literally say that the probable interpretation of Jesus' words in Matt.12:40 and Luke 11:32 is that he took the story of Jonah literally. The word 'fish' means any type of large sea creature. There is a shark (*Rhinodon Typicus*) which could swallow a man, as could some sperm whales. These are not unknown in the Eastern Mediterranean. Furthermore, archaeologists have discovered half-men, half-fish carvings at Nineveh. If Jonah came to Nineveh having had the experience described in the book, he would have been welcomed as a messenger of the gods and the king would have obeyed him. This would account for why mighty Nineveh repented at the message of 'insignificant' Jonah. However, it has to be said that even if the people were convinced by a false rumour that he had been swallowed by a huge fish this would have had the same effect. (The name "Nineveh" is related to a goddess whose name is written with a sign depicting a fish inside a womb).

Jonah runs away from God! (chap. 1)

God commissioned Jonah to call Nineveh to repentance. But Jonah didn't want Nineveh to repent and be forgiven. They were a cruel enemy. He wanted Nineveh destroyed! So he left his home at Gath-hepher near the Sea of Galilee, boarded a ship at Joppa (Jaffa) on the east coast bound for Tarshish (maybe Tartessus in Spain). Jonah travelled west whereas Nineveh was some 500 miles to the north east.

However, a great storm arose, frightening the sailors into throwing goods overboard to keep afloat and crying out to their gods. They woke Jonah and asked him to pray with them. They cast lots to see who was the cause of the trouble and danger. Jonah was indicated and he confessed his disobedience to God. Courageously he told them to throw him overboard so that they could be saved from the storm. At first they refused, but conditions worsened. So, asking God's forgiveness, they threw Jonah overboard. The sea became calm and the pagan sailors worshipped the Lord. Meanwhile, the "huge fish" swallowed Jonah. He was in the fish for three days.

Jonah prays for God's mercy (chap. 2)

He called to the Lord from the "the realm of the dead" (Sheol) in despair of being saved and knowing God's presence. Then he remembered the Lord. His loyalty is to him not to idols. So he thanks God for being the deliverer. Eventually Jonah was vomited out by the 'fish' on to the shore.

Jonah prophesies successfully to Nineveh (chap.3)

Again the Lord commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh and this time he obeyed. Nineveh was three days journey across. This refers to the district of Nineveh (similar to our 'Greater London') not just to the city. Jonah travelled into Nineveh for a day's journey (about 25 miles) and proclaimed that in forty days Nineveh would be overthrown. Perhaps because of Jonah's association with "the huge fish" the people of Nineveh repented and fasted. Even the King of Nineveh (actually the King of Assyria) followed suit. So God's judgment on Nineveh was averted.

Jonah is angry that Nineveh is saved (chap. 4)

Jonah admits to God that his not wanting Nineveh to repent and be saved was his reason for originally fleeing to Tarshish. He asks to be allowed to die and went out of the city, built himself a shelter and sulked. A castor-oil plant provided him with some shade but then a worm destroyed the plant. So Jonah was exposed to the blazing sun and scorching east wind which began to give him sunstroke. Again he prayed to die. God pointed out that Jonah was sorry for the plant, so shouldn't he (God) be merciful to Nineveh? The city, after all, contained 120,000 people who were ignorant of God.

MICAH

Micah lived in the 8th century BC, at the same time as Amos and Hosea (in Israel) and Isaiah (in Jerusalem). He came from S.W. Judah on the Philistine border. He spoke to the two capitals Samaria and Jerusalem and saw the reigns of the good kings Jotham (750-732BC), Hezekiah (729-657BC) and of the evil king Ahaz (735-716BC) who introduced pagan practices such as child sacrifice.

God's judgment on the sinful nation (chaps. 1-3)

God will descend from heaven and tread on the mountains which will melt before him. He will punish idolatry by destroying Samaria. The same sin has also afflicted Jerusalem. So Micah goes around 'naked' (i.e. wearing only a labourer's loin cloth) lamenting the coming judgment. He foresees the Assyrians coming from Lachish in the west. (The famous siege of Lachish took place in 701BC). The parents of Judah mourned for their children. Micah probably lived through both the fall of Samaria (722BC) and the siege of Jerusalem in 701BC. Jerusalem was miraculously preserved.

The reasons for the punishment were economic exploitation and oppression (2:1-2), and silencing of the prophets (2:6-7, 11). Even women and children were oppressed (2:9). Still, however, a remnant of Israel would remain with God at their head (2:12-13). The leaders treated the people like a butcher preparing slaughtered animals for cooking (3:1-3). Many prophets were bribed to say pleasing things, but they would be confounded (3:5-7) "But," said Micah, "as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression, to Israel his sin" (3:8). The judges, priests and prophets were all accepting bribes, but still claimed God was with them to preserve them from evil (3:11-12). Therefore, Jerusalem will be ruined.

The future new Jerusalem (chap. 4:1-8)

Micah, typically of the prophets, now looks right into what is still the future. He sees Jerusalem as the religious centre of the world. Many nations come to hear the word of the Lord, so they can obey him. It will be a time of peace and prosperity when "we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever end ever" (4:5). The Lord will rule over a once despised remnant of the Jewish nation for ever.

The old doomed Jerusalem (chap. 4: 9-1.3)

Micah, like Isaiah, looks forward 100 years to the time when the enemy would no longer be Assyria but Babylon (v.10). The King (Zedekiah) would be taken into exile, followed by the people (v.9-10). The surrounding nations will also be punished.

The messiah from Bethlehem (chap.5)

During the Assyrian siege, Micah foretells, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times ... He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth" (v. 2, 4). So Micah combines the first and second coming of Christ. Assyria will be defeated ("seven" ... "eight" means any number required, v.5). The remnant of Israel will be victorious among the nations. Judah will be purified and will rely on God not on arms, witchcraft and idols.

God's demands of his people (chap. 6)

The Lord has a controversy with his people. How has he wearied them that they disobey him? He redeemed them from Egypt and kept them in the wilderness. Micah asks, "Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" (v. 7). No. "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (v.8).

God will not forget the financial dishonesty (short measure, inaccurate weights), the violence and the deceit. Economic inflation and frustration will result from these practices (6:10-15). There is violence, deceit and contempt even amongst family and friends (7:2-6).

However, again one day God will restore and extend the land greatly to receive the exiles back. But the earth will be

desolate. The nations will see this and be ashamed, deprived of their power. So Micah finishes by saying “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. You will be faithful to Jacob, and show love to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our ancestors in days long ago” (7:18-20).

NAHUM

Nahum was probably from Judah although we do not know where Elkosh was. He prophesied sometime between the fall of the Egyptian city of Thebes to the Assyrians (3:8 -10) in 663 BC and the fall of Nineveh to the Babylonians and Medes in 612 BC. He was therefore a contemporary of Zephaniah and ministered shortly before Habakkuk and Jeremiah.

God's condemnation of Nineveh (chap. 1)

Nahum's prophecy is some of the most powerful poetry in the Old Testament. Verses 2-10 seem to be an acrostic poem (each verse beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet - see Psalms 9-10, 119). Assyria had destroyed the northern nation of Israel and had threatened Jerusalem, but, says Nahum, the downfall of Assyria with its capital Nineveh is approaching.

God is jealous and shows vengeance and wrath to his enemies. He is, however, slow to anger (v.3). (After all, he sent Jonah to bring Nineveh to repentance earlier). The Lord comes in whirlwind and storm; the clouds are caused by him as human feet kick up dust. His fierce heat dries up rivers and seas, destroying the blossoms of Bashan, Carmel and Lebanon. His power is shown in earthquakes.

No-one can stand against the Lord's indignation, but on the other hand he is a good refuge to all who trust him in times of trouble. But Nineveh will be destroyed whatever they do against the Lord. An overwhelming flood will make an end of Nineveh (v.8). This actually happened. Flood waters breached the walls, allowing the enemy to invade. An evil leader has come from Nineveh rebelling against God (v.11). This may have been Sennacherib, who conquered Lachish and besieged Jerusalem in 701BC. Although Assyria is powerful, they will fail and no longer afflict Judah. The enemy will be destroyed with their descendants and gods. Judah can rejoice in her peace.

The attack on Nineveh (chap.2)

The attacker advances on Nineveh but God will restore Judah. Nahum vividly pictures the battle of Nineveh. The Assyrian soldiers with red shields and armour and shiny flashing weapons; the chariots rushing in panic; the exhausted troops stumbling. There is a siege engine armed with a battering ram outside the city. Then the enemy released the dammed up waters of the Tigris so that the city falls. The refugees beat their breasts in sorrow as the drinking water is destroyed and the city is looted. Nineveh had been like a lion's den with the lion killing prey for his cubs. But now it is destroyed. The messengers who collected tribute from the nations for Assyria will be no more (v.13).

Nineveh destroyed (chap. 3)

Nahum condemns Nineveh as a prostitute who seduced other nations into bondage. The place was full of violence, plunder and lies. But now it is full of corpses. The city will be punished like an adulteress being publicly exposed and pelted with filth. Other nations will turn away in disgust. Nineveh will be no better than Thebes which had been protected by the river Nile and canals, with help from Sudan (Gush), Somalia (Put) and Libya. Yet Assyria had conquered Thebes destroying its centuries old treasures with fire and carrying out great slaughter. So Nineveh's fortresses will fall like ripe figs. Though Assyria is like a mighty locust swarm it will suddenly disappear, as such a swarm does. Attempts to withstand the siege will be futile. Nineveh fell quickly into ruins and is today simply a mound, known as Tell Kuyunjik "the mound of many sheep."

HABAKKUK

Habakkuk lived at the end of the seventh century BC round about the time of the fall of Nineveh (612BC) and Egypt at Carchemish (605BC) to Babylonians. Soon after this period the Babylonians took Jerusalem (597BC) and destroyed it (587BC).

The prophet's complaints and the Lord's answers (chaps. 1 -2)

He pours out his disappointment and anguish that God has not answered prayer or saved his people from violence and injustice. The wicked are triumphing. God's answer poses a greater problem. Habakkuk will be amazed at the unbelievable thing God will do in raising up the mighty and ruthless Babylonians (1:5-11). The prophet responds that God, the Holy One, has ordained them to execute his judgment. Yet as the Holy One how can he tolerate the treachery, cruelty and arrogance of the enemy (1:12-2:1)?

God answers by revealing a vision of the downfall of Babylon which will take a long time to be fulfilled. The enemy is arrogant, evil and greedy. But the righteous person will live by his faith or faithfulness. (St.Paul finds much deeper meaning in this verse 2:4 than Habakkuk would have realized).

Then Habakkuk speaks out five taunts or 'woes.' Woe to him who becomes rich by stealing, plunder and violence. He will receive like treatment (2:6-8). Woe to him who builds his house on the proceeds of extortion (2:9-11). Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and crime (2:12-14). Woe to him who enjoys humiliating his neighbour (2:15-17). Woe to him who trusts in idols (2:18-20).

Habakkuk's psalm of triumph (chap.3)

The prophet stands in awe before God who comes from the southern desert (Teman in Edom, Paran in Sinai) with great glory and praise. In appearance he was like the rising sun. The earth quaked. He was encircled by thunder and lightning. The earth suffered the storm of his wrath. He saves his people and crushes the enemy. Habakkuk is at first horrified, but then he rejoices that, although disaster should strike the crops and animals, "yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Saviour" (v.18).

ZEPHANIAH

Zephaniah prophesied in Josiah's reign over Judah (640-609BC) at about the time Jeremiah began his ministry. He was a descendant of Hezekiah who was king 70 years earlier, in Isaiah's time. Josiah's two predecessors Manasseh and Amon had been evil. Zephaniah probably prophesied before Josiah initiated his reform, following the re-discovery of the book of the law in the temple in 621BC.

The day of the Lord (chap. 1)

Total destruction of life is coming. The Lord will cut off every idol-worshipper in Judah, every violent and deceitful man, the rich and the apathetic. The day of the Lord will involve great anguish and gloom. Many will die violent deaths.

Punishment for the nations (chap. 2)

Zephaniah pleads with Judah to repent and seek humility and righteousness. Philistia will be ruined. Ashkelon will be destroyed until the remnant of Judah eventually takes over. (This happened for the first time in 1957 when the Jews took over Ashkelon and have made it a sea port). Moab and Ammon will be destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah for mocking the Lord's people. The Ethiopians will perish. The Assyrians with their capital, Nineveh, will become a ruin. (See on Nahum 3).

The fate of Jerusalem (chap. 3)

Jerusalem rebels against the Lord. Her leaders are oppressors. Her prophets are arrogant and treacherous. Her priests profane the temple and twist the law. Jerusalem should have taken warning from God's punishment of other nations. But God will preserve a remnant who are meek and humble and trust in him. They will live in honesty and peace for good. God will be with them. "He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing" (v.17). He will gather the exiles back to the land with singing, from every land to which they had gone. They will be honoured by all nations and their fortunes restored. The complete fulfilment of this is still future.

HAGGAI

The last three prophets in the Old Testament ministered after the Jews had returned from exile in Babylon, during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. In 538 Zerubbabel, grandson of King Jehoiachin, led the first party of exiles back to rebuild the temple. But work soon stopped because of opposition and apathy. Years later Haggai began to challenge the people to complete the temple (520BC) as did Zechariah (520-518BC). So it was that by 516BC the temple was rebuilt. From August to December 520BC Haggai spoke four times to the Jews.

A challenge to rebuild the temple – August 520BC (chap. 1)

The people claimed it was not time to build the temple. But Haggai challenged them about living in their panelled houses (i.e. their houses were complete and luxurious) whilst the temple was in ruins. This is why the harvests were scanty, food and clothing was in short supply and there was a high rate of inflation. So every man followed his selfish priorities neglecting his duty to God. They ought to have gathered timber to rebuild the temple first. Zerubbabel the Governor and Joshua the High Priest, with the people, recognized that this was a word from the Lord and within three weeks had begun work on the temple (i.e. as soon as the harvest was completed).

The future glory foreshadowed by the new temple – October 520BC (chap. 2:1-9).

Few of the people had seen Solomon's glorious temple which had been destroyed 70 years earlier, but they knew about it. By comparison, the new temple seemed pathetic. But Haggai tells them to take heart. The same Holy Spirit present with them at the Exodus is still with them. God is going to shake the universe at a future date (Rev. 6:12-17 & 16:17-21) so that the nations will gladly bring their treasures to the temple in honour of the messiah. After all, the riches of the nations belong to God. At this future time the Lord will give "shalom" - wholeness and peace. (The message of Zechariah 1:1-6 follows here in November 520).

Promised blessings for a defiled people who repent –December 520BC (chap. 2:10-19)

The Old Testament ritual law taught that a man could be ceremonially defiled by e.g. contact with a dead body. But holiness is not contagious. So working on the holy temple does not automatically remove the defilement of their previous selfish neglect of the building. It is only as they put God first in their lives that he will bless them fully.

Zerubbabel, God's "signet ring"- a picture of the messiah – December 520BC (chap.2:20-23)

Here is a clear example of a prophecy with an immediate partial fulfilment but a future ultimate total fulfilment. Certainly God is going to favour and bless Zerubbabel. But he, as a descendant of David, is a prophetic picture (or 'type') of the greater descendant of David - the messiah. So the heavens and earth will be shaken and Israel's enemies overthrown. Zerubbabel (and ultimately the messiah) will be God's chosen signet ring. The signet ring had the king's seal on it and was for safety, therefore, worn by the king. So "Zerubbabel" would be invested with God's authority and protection, being in close relationship with him. (It is interesting that God was determined to reject Zerubbabel's grandfather Jehoiachin or Coniah even though he was his signet ring (Jeremiah 22:24)).

ZECHARIAH

Zechariah prophesied at the time of Haggai 520-518BC. He was from a priestly family whose grandfather Iddo may be the one mentioned as returning from exile in Neh.12:4.

A call to repentance (chap.1:1-6)

Probably in November 520BC, (following Haggai's first two messages - in August and October) Zechariah reminded the people of God's past judgments. "'Return to me,' declares the LORD Almighty, 'and I will return to you,' says the LORD Almighty" (v.3). They should not repeat the disobedience of their ancestors with its disastrous consequences.

The eight visions (chaps. 1:7-6:15)

A vision of the horsemen (chap. 1:7-17)

On the 15th February 519BC - two months after Haggai's last message - Zechariah had a vision of angelic horsemen patrolling the earth (like the Persian empire's mounted 'policemen'). The first one on a red horse (i.e. the reddish brown bay horse) stood amongst the fragrant evergreen myrtle trees. Behind him in the ravine were riders on red, brown and white horses. This probably was the Kidron Valley outside Jerusalem showing God had returned to the outskirts of Jerusalem but not into the city because the temple was unfinished. The riders report peace throughout the world. The angel of the Lord (the rider amongst the myrtle trees) asked God how long mercy would be withheld from Jerusalem. The Lord replied that he was jealous for Jerusalem and would return to it; the temple would be rebuilt and property returned. But he is angry with the nations.

Vision of four horns and four craftsmen (chap . 1: 18-21)

Zechariah then had a vision of "four horns" who scattered the Jews ('horn' means 'power'). This refers to the Babylonian empire ("four" means complete as in "the four corners of the earth"). But the four horns are defeated by the four craftsmen i.e. the Persian empire which conquered Babylon.

Vision of the measuring line (chap. 2)

The man in the vision was measuring Jerusalem, presumably for rebuilding (this happened 75 years later in 445BC. under Nehemiah). The Lord declares that it will need no walls because he will protect it as a wall of fire. He invites the exiles, to return from Babylon and foretells judgment on the nations who have touched Israel- "the apple of his eye." The Lord is coming to live in Jerusalem and "Many nations will be joined with the LORD in that day and will become my people" (v.11). This is a reference both to the worldwide Christian church and the future of Jerusalem as the centre of the earth.

Vision of the high priests's investiture (chap.3)

Zechariah saw Joshua, the high priest standing in filthy robes, i.e. strict observance of ceremonial and food laws had been impossible in exile - hence the defilement. Satan stood accusing Joshua, but is rebuked by the Lord. The angel of the Lord, replaced Joshua's filthy robes with clean ones, showing he was forgiven and was fit to take office. Then the angel foretells the coming of the Lord's servant, the branch (see Isa. 40-55, esp. 52:13-53:12 and Isaiah 11) i.e. the messiah. He will be the all-seeing ("seven eyes") stone (1 Peter 2:4-8). The engraving may relate to the stone worn by the high priest on which the names of the twelve tribes were engraved. So the messiah as the high priest "will remove the sin of this land in a single day" (v.9) - surely a reference to the cross. Then there will be universal peace and prosperity (symbolized by v. 10).

Vision of the golden lampstand and olive trees (chap 4)

The prophet now sees a seven-branched golden lampstand (the menorah). The old temple had ten of these (1 Kings 7:49) and the holy place in the tabernacle had one (Ex. 25:31). The lampstand represents the witness and worship of his people. The two olive trees providing it with oil are Joshua and Zerubbabel who, by waiting on God, are anointed by the "oil" of the Holy Spirit to encourage the worship. So the people became the lights of the world. As Zerubbabel has laid the foundation stone so he will lay the last stone of the building. The final fulfilment of this vision refers to the future completion of the New Testament church - when the last stone (convert) is added (v.7). The two "anointed ones" or "messiahs" (v.14) refer immediately to Zerubbabel, the Davidic prince, and Joshua, the Davidic priest. But the reference goes beyond them to a greater fulfilment. The Jews of Qumran expected two messiahs - one a priest and the other a Davidic prince. We know that Jesus combined both roles. (The image of the

lampstands and olives is taken up again in Revelation 1:12, 20; 11)

Vision of the flying scroll (chap. 5:1-4)

Zechariah saw a flying scroll 30 feet long and 15 feet wide (9 x 4.5 metres). This is an effective curse on every thief and every liar.

Vision of the woman in a basket (chap. 5:5-11)

Next he saw a large measuring basket which the angel explained represented the sin of the people. When the lead cover was removed, Zechariah saw a woman inside the basket. She personified wickedness. The lid was replaced over her and the basket was carried off to Babylonia (Shinar) by two “women” with stork’s wings. There a temple was built for her. So sin would be removed from Israel.

Vision of four chariots (chap .6:1-8)

This is similar to the first vision. Zechariah saw four chariots coming from between two bronze mountains. This is the gateway of heaven - bronze was used with iron for defence. The first chariot had red horses, the second black, the third white and fourth dappled. Chariots represent God’s initiative in the affairs of the nations. They are the four spirits of heaven going out over the whole world to execute judgment. Victory is proclaimed over the sinister and turbulent north which implies victory over all nations (compare the imagery of Revelation 6).

Joshua crowned - a picture of the messiah (chap.6:9-16)

Zechariah is told to crown Joshua with a golden crown. He is to be called “the branch” who will branch out and build the temple of the Lord. He will rule in majesty as a priest/king. Many nations would help with the rebuilding of the temple. This is a clear prophetic picture of the messiah. He is the branch, the coming Davidic king (Isa. 11:1; 53:2; Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Rev. 5:5).

Messages on the question of fasting (chaps. 7-8)

The people now wanted to know whether they should continue the fasts observed annually in the fifth and seventh months commemorating the fall of Jerusalem in 587BC and the memory of the murdered governor Gedaliah respectively. Zechariah prophesied that they had held the fasts and feasts for their own benefit, not God’s. The prophets before the exile had said God demanded justice, mercy and compassion. But the people had disobeyed. The Lord promises to dwell in Jerusalem, making it a city of truth, peace and prosperity. He will bring his people from east and west (apparently a reference to the twentieth century return of the Jews from all over the world - not just Babylon). He encourages the temple rebuilding and promises that he will give the people security after their years of danger. Instead of a curse Judah and Israel will become a blessing in the world. God wants the fasts of the 5th month, 7th month, and 10th month (commemorating Nebuchadnezzar’s siege of Jerusalem) and 4th month (Nebuchadnezzar’s breaking down of the walls of Jerusalem) to become joyful feasts. Jerusalem and the Jews will become the centre of a worldwide seeking after God. This is yet to be fulfilled.

The Lord intervenes in judgment (chaps. 9-11)

Judgement on the nations (chap. 9:1-8)

Syria, Tyre, Sidon and Philistia will all be punished as Israel’s enemies.

The coming of Zion's king (chap. 9:9-17)

The first Palm Sunday is predicted in v.9. Zion’s king will come - gentle and riding on a donkey. He will bring in peace to the world. The latter is yet to be fulfilled. God will lead his people to triumph over the enemy.

The careless ‘shepherds’ of Israel condemned (chap. 10:1-11:3)

Israel’s leaders are not caring for the people. Idolaters and diviners are misleading the people. They will be punished but God will care for his people. He will bring them back from exile in distant lands.

The good shepherd rejected (chap.11:4-17)

The Lord calls Zechariah to be a good shepherd to “the flock marked for slaughter” (oppressed people of God) but his mission is doomed to failure (v.6). Nevertheless the prophet obeyed the Lord and pastured the “sheep” with two staffs “Favour” and “Union” (symbolising the result of good leadership). He removed false shepherds. But the people rejected him and he wearied of them. He broke the staff “Favour” showing the covenant was broken. They

paid him off with thirty pieces of silver which, on the Lord's instruction, Zechariah threw to the potter. Then he broke the other staff "Union" showing the people would be divided. Finally God asked Zechariah to act as a foolish, selfish shepherd or leader of Israel - who would replace the rejected good shepherd. This passage, which may have been an acted parable, speaks clearly of Jesus the good shepherd, rejected by the Jews and sold for thirty pieces of silver, which Judas paid to the potter for his field.

Final judgment and salvation (chaps. 12-14)

Destruction of Jerusalem's enemies (chap. 12:1-9)

Here Zechariah prophesies the battle of Armageddon when all the nations will attack Jerusalem. But God will intervene supernaturally to protect his people.

The Jews mourn the one they pierced (chap. 12:10-14)

Through an outpouring of the Holy Spirit the Jews will mourn over the one they pierced (see Revelation 1:7). This will happen in the future – an extensive repentance and conversion of the Jews to Christ.

The land cleansed (chap. 13:1-6)

There will be a fountain open to the Jews to cleanse them from sin and impurity. Here is a clear reference to the cross of Christ. False prophets (of whom there were many after the exile) who inflicted wounds on themselves would be removed from the land.

The shepherd attacked (chap. 13:7-9)

The good shepherd is struck and the people are scattered. At some stage two-thirds of the people will perish but one-third will be spiritually refined so that they act as the people of God.

The Lord returns to reign (chap.14)

Zechariah returns to the battle of Armageddon. Jerusalem will be attacked with some success. But then the Lord will intervene (the second coming). He will descend to the Mt. of Olives. A great earthquake will split the mount from east to west, creating a huge valley and an extensive plain around Jerusalem (vv. 4, 10). There will be cosmic changes blotting out sunlight. Living water will flow from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea one way and to the Mediterranean the other. This may have both a spiritual and literal fulfilment. The kingdom of God will be universal (Rev. 11:15). There will be a terrible plague on the enemies of Jerusalem. Some say it reads remarkably like the effects of nuclear radiation (vv. 12-15). The survivors will worship God, otherwise they would suffer further punishments. At the same time all life - 'sacred' and 'secular' - in Judah and Jerusalem will be dedicated to God and bring him honour.

MALACHI

Malachi probably wrote about 80 years after Haggai and Zechariah (460-450BC). Either Nehemiah had not yet become governor of Jerusalem or he was absent. The people had become despondent and disillusioned at the hard times after all the great promises Haggai and Zechariah had made, so they had become slipshod about worship and service to God.

Only the best is good enough for God (chap. 1)

Malachi reminds the people of God's love but they cannot see how God loves them. The Lord replies that Edom, the descendants of Jacob's ("Israel's") brother Esau, had been conquered by Babylon, but unlike the Jews, had not been restored. God is Israel's father but the son does not honour the father. Their wrong attitudes and their offering of crippled and diseased animals as sacrifices meant their offerings were defiled. He rejects them. They are dishonouring his name which is to be great amongst all nations. In fact the Gentiles offer better sacrifices (v.11).

The priests condemned (chap. 2:1-9)

The priests had broken the covenant God had made with the descendants of Levi - the priestly family. Their behaviour showed no reverence for God. Their teaching was toned down to be popular but the Lord had caused them to be despised.

Divorce condemned (chap. 2:10-16)

Judah broke the covenant God had made with the people at Sinai. They were marrying foreign, pagan women. This led to compromise and idolatry (see Ezra 9-10, Nehemiah 13). The older men were discarding their wives in favour of these young foreign women. Indifference to God meant callousness to each other.

God is just in all his dealings (chap. 2:17-3:5)

The people have wearied God by saying he favours those who do evil. A messenger will be sent to prepare the way of the Lord, who will suddenly come to his temple. He will be the "refiner" of the people - purifying the priests until acceptable offerings are made to the Lord. Those involved in witchcraft, adultery, perjury and oppression will be punished.

God requires tithing of his people (chap. 3:6-18)

God has had mercy on the people's constant disobedience. He invites them to return and not to rob him by not bringing the full tithes (10% of income) to him. If they repent and pay their tithes then he will bless them abundantly, removing disease and pests from their crops. God has recorded the names of those who have feared him. They will be his treasured possession.

The day of the Lord (chap. 4)

On that day the Lord will be like the sun. He will burn up the wicked like stubble. But for the righteous his "wings" (rays) will bring healing. So the people must remember the law given at Horeb (Sinai). "Elijah" would come before that day. (Jesus identified John the Baptist as both the "messenger" of 3:1 and as "Elijah" here - see Matt.11:10, 14). John knew there was to be judgment by fire but this will be fulfilled at the second coming of the messiah.

FROM MALACHI TO MATTHEW

Over 400 years elapsed between the time of Malachi (430BC) and the events of the New Testament. The Persian Empire lasted until 333BC. During this time the Jews who had returned from exile had been permanently cured from idolatry. However, they also developed a contempt for other nations. The scribes became a class who guarded, studied and taught the law strictly according to the letter rather than the spirit. They also stressed Jewish exclusivism. So the seeds of the worst kind of Phariseism were sown. During the exile the temple was unavailable and this led to simpler worship based more on reading the law and associated with the synagogue. Also the high priest became a political leader. The Sanhedrin also developed in this period. Although Hebrew was the worship language, the exiles brought back with them the language of their conquerors Chaldean or Aramaic for everyday use.

The Greeks successfully resisted the Persians' westward advance at the battles of Marathon (490BC), Salamis (480BC) and Plataea (479BC). In 336 Alexander the Great succeeded to the throne of his father Philip of Macedon. He defeated the Persians at the Battle of Issus in 333BC, gaining complete control of the Persian Empire three years later. Alexander (possibly influenced by his teacher Aristotle) valued Jewish culture and made Jews welcome in his new city of Alexandria in Egypt. Jews in 'the Dispersion' lived in North Africa and Asia Minor. Alexander died in 323BC, aged 33. By 315BC his empire had been divided into four between his quarrelling generals (1) Macedonia, (2) Thrace (3) Syria with Mesopotamia (4) Egypt with Southern Syria (see Dan.7). Palestine was ruled by the Ptolemies of Egypt until 198BC, when Antiochus III the Great of Syria conquered Egypt.

Ptolemy Philadelphus (285-247BC) encouraged the translation of a Greek version of the Old Testament - the Septuagint (called so after the 70 Jewish scholars who began it in Alexandria). This spread the Old Testament to the Jews in dispersion and the Gentiles. Greek influence was important in Palestine, bringing pride and scepticism not least to the high priests. Some Jews, therefore, were pro-Greek ('Hellenizers') others were 'Separatists' (Chasidim).

In 176BC Antiochus IV Epiphanes came to the throne, intending to bring unity in the Empire by forcing Greek ways on all citizens. Stopped by the Romans from carrying out a campaign in Egypt in 167BC, Antiochus took vengeance on Jerusalem, sacking the temple, erecting a statue of the god Zeus and offering a sow (an 'unclean' animal) on the altar (see Daniel 11). An old priest, Mattathias of Hasmonaean family, killed a Syrian officer at Modin who came to carry out Antiochus' orders. He, his five sons, and many 'Chasidim' organised a resistance movement. In 166BC he died and his son Judas Maccabaeus ("Judas the Hammer") led the Jews to an incredible series of victories against the Syrians. So on the 25th day of the month Chislev in 165BC, Judas cleansed the defiled temple. So began the annual feast of the dedication (see John 10:22).

Judas was killed in 161BC and his brother Jonathan took over. Rival claimants for the Syrian throne vied to gain Jonathan's support. One offered to appoint him high priest of the nation (although Jonathan was not a descendant of Aaron). However, Jonathan was executed in 142BC. Simon, his only remaining brother, capably led the country in prosperity and a fair amount of independence. The high priesthood was formally vested in the Hasmonaean family. But Simon was murdered by his son-in-law Ptolemy in 135BC.

He was succeeded by John Hyrcanus (135-105BC). Judaeen power was extended to cover Samaria. The Samaritans (despised by the Jews because of their mixed Jewish-Gentile blood and rejected by the returning exiles as helpers) had built, a rival temple on Mount Gerizim. John destroyed this, creating much bitterness (see John 4:9). He also forcibly converted the Edomites to Judaism. At this time the "Chasidim" became known as the Pharisees ("separate ones"). The Hellenizers (high priestly and noble families) became the Sadducees ("descendants of Zadok the Priest").

John died in 105BC and for a year his son Aristobulus reigned, followed by his brother Alexander Jannaeus (104-78 BC). Alexander was a cruel and proud conqueror. The Pharisees and Sadducees quarrelled (Alexander supported the latter). After a bitter civil war Alexander ordered 800 leading Pharisees to be crucified. He died in 78BC and there was civil war from 78-65BC. His widow appointed his elder son Hyrcanus high priest. After she died, the younger son Aristobulus seized the throne with the help of Antipater, an Idumaean (or Edomite).

At this point the Romans intervened. In 63BC Pompey, the Roman general, arrived at Jerusalem to restore Hyrcanus to the throne. The siege lasted three months and 12,000 Jews were massacred. Pompey dared to enter the Holy of

Holies in the temple. Hyrcanus was restored as high priest but not king. Rather he was called “ethnarch” over Judah only. Galilee and Samaria became separate districts.

However, the real power rested with Antipater. In 49BC civil war broke out between the Roman generals Pompey and Caesar. Antipater and Hyrcanus supported Pompey, but when Caesar defeated Pompey at Pharsalia (48BC) Antipater quickly befriended Caesar. So in 47BC Antipater was made a Roman citizen and appointed procurator of Judea. Julius Caesar allowed the Jews religious liberty and tax remissions. They rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. In 44 BC Caesar died. In 43BC Antipater was poisoned, having made his son Phasael governor of Jerusalem, and his son Herod governor of Galilee. Hyrcanus - still High Priest - was murdered by his nephew Antigonus in 40BC. Phasael committed suicide in prison. Herod fled and Antigonus became both king and high priest for a short time.

Herod went to Rome and the Romans decreed he should become king of the Jews. In 37BC Herod and the Romans conquered Jerusalem. Herod executed Antigonus and all remaining members of the Hasmonean family. Herod has been called ‘the Great’ but he was hated by the Jews as an Edomite and friend of Romans. He sank into vice and excess. He sided with Antony in his conflict with Octavian for Roman power. Antony was defeated at Actium in 31BC and Herod quickly succeeded in befriending Octavian. The temple was rebuilt by Herod even more gloriously than by Solomon (John 2:20). Supporters of Herod – ‘Herodians’ - are mentioned in Mark 3:6; 12:13. But the ‘Zealots’ were more extreme than the Pharisees in not swearing allegiance or paying taxes either to Herod or Caesar. Towards the end of his life, Herod was seriously diseased, his mind tortured by guilt and fear. Small wonder he reacted to the wise men from the east seeking another king of the Jews by slaughtering the innocents at Bethlehem. The “Caesar Augustus” of Luke 2:1 was in fact Octavian.